

exactly
where they'd fall

a novel



Laura Rae Amos

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SEPTEMBER

1.1: a fraction of a sliver of a moment

JODIE HATED ADORABLE THINGS: HAPPY COUPLES, CHILDREN, puppies, hugs. Jodie hated favors, she hated generosity, she hated having to say “thank you.” But Jodie couldn't hate Drew, with those kind, dark eyes, rich as coffee. He was positively adorable. Sweet, even. She didn't even ask him to help, but here he was in her apartment with his laptop, going through his Facebook friends (all five hundred of them) trying to find her a new roommate.

“You really don't need to bother.” She glanced over his shoulder as he scanned through the names, face after face of beaming smiles. Smilebook, they should have called it. Fakebook. Jodie hated social media. She hated social anything. She was certain he wouldn't find anyone for her in there. He finally landed on his profile page, his status reading: *That is not what I meant at all; that is not it, at all – updated 14 hours ago.* Other mysterious notifications Jodie didn't understand: *Drew kicked a sheep at Amelia, Amelia poked Drew.* A virtual gift he'd received, a pixel pig holding a heart. Jodie scowled. “Why the *hell* did you kick a sheep?”

“Heh,” he chuckled, clicking away from the page. “It's a game, Jodie. Get yourself a profile, and I'll kick a sheep at you too.”

The whole idea of it just sounded half vulgar and half like animal abuse. “No, really, that’s just wrong.”

“Or there’s Scrabbler.”

“That’s not fair, you were an English major. What’s wrong with you people?” By people, she meant English majors. “You can’t get a job with your degree, so you vow to spend the rest of your life beating people at Scrabble?”

He laughed absently, still clicking away at his laptop. “Go log into your email,” he said. “You need to confirm something.”

“What?”

“I made you a page. Password’s your name, for now. You can change it.”

“A Facebook page? Why? No! I don’t want one.” She backed away from his laptop with her hands held up, fingers spread, as if the internet might jump from his laptop and attack her. “Why did you do that?”

“Really, it’ll help you meet people.” There was such genuine concern in his voice, she couldn’t stand it. She went to the other side of the room and sat in front of her desktop computer. She refreshed her email. There was a confirmation link to click, and she clicked it. A Facebook page with her name on it, and he’d already requested four friends on her behalf: himself (already accepted), and three others still pending, Amelia, Piper, and Tom.

“Refresh your page,” he said.

She did. *Drew kicked a sheep at Jodie.* She turned back to gape at him. He leaned back in his chair, arms folded over his chest and a beautiful, accomplished smile on his face. She never liked the color blue, but he wore it so often, and in so many shades – ocean, navy, steel – all of which seemed to highlight the bronze he’d accumulated over the summer on his cheekbones and forearms, and all of which only brightened that generous smile. “I feel so violated,” she said.

She was mostly kidding, and he seemed to know that. She was quite sure that would be the first and only time anyone had ever been violated by Drew Weston in any capacity. He grinned, so friendly she thought he might wink, so precious she thought she might sigh, so corny she felt inclined to laugh. But instead she only coughed a stifled “heh,” and she didn’t know if she was laughing at him or herself.

“But this is easier,” he said, turning back to his laptop. “Now I can send you links to these girls.”

Somehow it disappointed her that it had all still been about the list.

Jodie wanted him to give up, but she didn’t say so. Truth was, she hadn’t had any luck finding a new roommate for herself. Piper was getting married in a few months, and now Jodie would have to find someone clean, tolerable, smart, responsible, not too old, not too young, not male, no dogs, no fish (no animals period would be a good rule of thumb), not too sweet, not too boring, not too pretty-pretty. Ugly was okay. Jodie didn’t care if she was ugly.

Piper wasn’t ugly though. She was perfect. Irreplaceable. And now Jodie had to try to replace her.

Jodie took an empty water glass to the kitchen, the clacking sound of Drew’s keyboard carrying on behind her. A flurry of words, all those profiles, one after another after another. How could anyone manage to know so many people? Did he remember how he met each of them? Would he be able to tell two of them apart if they happened to be standing next to each other? Had he ever met them in person at all?

Jodie washed her hands, scrubbing the backs, the cracks in between, scraping her fingernails against her own sudsy palms as if she were scrubbing in for a delivery, though she was only making some sandwiches for lunch. By the time she turned to see what Drew wanted in his sandwich, he already had Amelia on the

phone. Of course. Jodie always knew it the second those two connected – he would go positively starry-eyed. “Come on over,” he said into the phone, leaning against Jodie’s kitchen table as if in a dream. He turned to her then. “You don’t mind if Melie comes over.”

It wasn’t a question in any form, but Jodie answered anyway. “Of course not. I don’t mind. Why would I mind?”

Amelia. She was his girlfriend, but it was so much more complicated than that. Longtime friends who happened to be sleeping with each other, nothing alike yet strangely complementary, always side by side. Like salt and pepper.

The kitchen alcove of Jodie’s apartment was small. Piper didn’t cook, and Jodie was too busy to cook, so they had no use for anything bigger. Piper made salads and Jodie could do sandwiches, but beyond that, the two of them were hopeless. They just stocked their freezer with frozen pizzas and Lean Cuisines. Back before the boyfriends and the real jobs and the grown up lives – it was Amelia who always cooked for them. Amelia hosted their parties. She was the one who made the cocktail snacks, the savory tarts, vegetable trays, and cheeseballs with gourmet herb crackers. She decorated for Halloween, Christmas, the Fourth of July, and even Veterans Day. But it seemed like forever since they had those parties together – now Amelia hosted most of them at her own place, which was roomier than Jodie’s tiny apartment, and had a large spacious kitchen for Amelia to work in. Amelia’s kitchen was something straight out of *Better Homes & Gardens*.

Drew’s phone beeped softly as he hung up. Stepping beside Jodie in the kitchen, he announced his presence by taking a lock of her hair around his finger and flipping it. The hair flopped back down, thick and heavy, the shoulder-length tips brushing across the back of her neck as they landed. She froze. He continued talking about Amelia, roommates, lists, lunch, while Jodie could

still feel the tingle he'd left on her skin. He probably couldn't have known how infrequently anyone ever touched her.

When she began moving again, she asked him, "Is ham okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks," he said.

Jodie found it ridiculous how many people were getting married. It was just an ordinary September, but if this was normal, it was something Jodie had never noticed before. What was it about being almost thirty that made everyone want to pair up and breed like the world was coming to an end? At least Piper wasn't getting married until the spring. "Everyone's getting married," she mused out loud.

"Yeah? Amelia's dragging me to her cousin's wedding this weekend."

"See!" Jodie shrieked. "And next week, my brother's getting married."

Jodie's brother, Amelia's ex. Drew looked up, seeming both surprised and relieved. Then, like an afterthought, he shrugged it off – not even Drew was that selfless. "Oh? Good for him."

Jodie laughed. "Don't worry, you've got her all to yourself. You guys will probably be next."

He shook his head. "I already asked. She said no."

"I don't think she thought you were serious."

"She knows I'm serious," he said. "She doesn't even want a live-in boyfriend. I'll go ahead and guess that means she doesn't want a husband either."

"I don't blame her, actually." Jodie twisted her lips into a smirk. If he took offense, he didn't show it.

Jodie finished three sandwiches, and by the time she'd placed them on the table, there was Amelia's knock at the door. Drew let her in. The two of them kissed at the doorstep, smiling at each other for just a moment, and then Amelia turned to Jodie. "Hi Jodie." Amelia took in the scene from the doorway and then

offered up a guarded smile. Amelia was all legs and freckles. She wasn't that pretty, more graceful than she was glamorous. She walked like a large bird, slow and poised. She made Jodie feel ordinary – or maybe it was the way Drew looked at her that made Jodie feel ordinary.

"I have three more girls for you to look at," Amelia said, pulling her notes from a paper folder under her arm, placing them on the table. Her list was written in black ink on a yellow lined legal pad, each name numbered and broken into several fields of data – age, occupation, hair color, favorite food, hobbies, habits – as if she were collecting specimens for a scientific study. She took the seat next to Drew at the table and began to narrate the women out loud: "Amy, divorced but with grown children."

"No," Jodie said. "Grown children means grandchildren visiting. No thanks."

"Molly, employed, she's a DJ?"

"No, I hate music. I can't live with a DJ."

"Emmy, single, she's an actress."

"That just means she doesn't work," Jodie said.

Amelia shook a finger at her. "She does work. I promise you she does."

"Is she pretty?"

"Sure," Amelia said. "What does it matter if she's pretty? Piper's pretty."

"Right, but she's Piper. That's different."

"Jodie," Amelia chided. "You should lighten up a bit, or you're going to end up alone." She paused. "Not that there's anything wrong with that. I like living alone." Amelia held her head high when she said it, but Drew took notice, looking up from his ham sandwich, not chewing. Jodie tried to swallow the snark on her tongue, but it was hard. Amelia did *not* like living alone – evidence the fact that she'd quickly moved in with every boyfriend she ever

had since she was old enough to leave home. Another reason Jodie was so surprised Amelia and Drew hadn't already shacked up together.

When they were finished, Drew reached out to touch Amelia's hand. "Are you heading back soon?"

"Actually," Amelia said, tilting her head to him as if anticipating his disappointment. "I can't. I have an errand to run out here." They made frown faces at each other, pouting like sad fish. Jodie leaned her cheek to her hand, waiting for them to finish.

"No problem," he said to Amelia. "Call me later then." He gathered his things. When he bent over the table to kiss Amelia goodbye, Jodie became flushed with a wide-eyed and terrible shock. It wasn't a very long kiss, and it certainly wasn't pornographic, but Jodie couldn't bear to watch it. She felt herself melt into a mound of jelly, staring ahead at a blank wall, the two of them coming apart slowly in her peripheral vision. It was just a simple kiss goodbye, yet impossibly deep without even the hint of open lips or tongues. She didn't even know what part she was jealous of; whatever it was, its absence overwhelmed her.

"See ya, Jodie," Drew said, already en route to the door.

Amelia started talking again, and it took Jodie a few seconds to snap out of the shock. Amelia's tense and structured chatter – something about her mother, the bank, phone calls and needing stamps – the tension in her eyebrows reflecting the priority of the task as she counted them off on her fingers.

They were never meant to be friends. Amelia dated Jodie's brother for three years; the friendship was meant to be temporary. It was meant to be one of those tangent friendships, strung together with loose ties so that it could untie again when the time was right. Instead, when her brother broke up with Amelia, they didn't untie. Their little group only became more intertwined and complex, and here were the two of them left over, stuck. It was hard to remember

all the previous lives they shared, where they started and where they stopped – Jodie hadn't thought not to mention her brother when Amelia mentioned a wedding she had to attend. "I know, my brother's getting married next week too."

"Eric," Amelia said, her fingers coming to a stop. The tension between her eyebrows went slack, weighted with nostalgia and some sort of accepted sadness.

"I mean," Jodie added, softer then. "I have no idea who to take to the wedding."

"That came up fast," Amelia said.

Jodie nodded, though it hadn't been that fast. Not terribly fast. It had been two years since he and Amelia broke up. Jodie had known Amelia for a long time. Seven years now, since the day her brother first introduced them. She'd known Amelia longer than Piper, and longer than Drew. She knew Amelia back when they were just girls – twenty-two, undergrads and clueless, grasping at the world and trying to create brand new lives from it. She tried to remember before Drew came into the picture. Did she and Amelia always have this quiet tension between them that bordered on resentment?

Jodie began laughing out loud at the joke she had in her head. "So, you mind if I borrow Drew for this wedding? You know how he likes them."

Amelia raised one eyebrow, her lips twisting into something that looked less like a smile than just confused and conflicted – over which part, Jodie didn't know. There was such a careful consideration in Amelia's eyes, Jodie had to glance away. Amelia finally sighed and offered up a strained smile. "No, Drew likes the open bar at weddings, there's a difference. Why don't you take Berges? Don't you like Berges?"

Passionate hate was a better description of what Jodie felt for Berges.

“Can you ask a divorced person to a wedding? Isn’t that bad luck or something?”

Amelia didn’t answer that. While the tension in her face melted, she seemed to drift into a thought. A deep one. Jodie wasn’t sure she’d buried her secrets well enough.

SOMETIMES YOU KNOW OF A PERSON FOR YEARS, SHARING OUTINGS as friends of a mutual friend, bumping into each other at parties but never speaking, never exchanging more than a nod, or a hello, or a goodnight. Jodie could still remember the first whole conversation she had with Drew. He and Amelia were already tied up with each other in that momentous but stunted way, but there was a moment – and Jodie wasn’t even sure if it was real – where she thought Drew might have actually been interested. She felt honestly ridiculous to think such a thing, to even consider it in the private cavities of her own head. Interested in her? No, it was unlikely. It must have been all in her mind, that moment when Amelia was still an impossibility to him, before she was dating him, or sleeping with him. That inescapable night Amelia had dragged them all along to their cocktail bar, and left them there with smoke on their clothes and neon lights in their eyes. One fraction of a sliver of a moment when Jodie thought Drew might have considered her an option.

Jodie's martini glass glinted pink light over her blunt-cut fingernails. Drew took the bar stool next to her, bringing in a breath of crisp fall air from outside, almost overpowering the smell of cigarette smoke in the room. He exhaled heavily as he sat. “Why do you think she won’t date me?”

Jodie looked him up and down. “Because you look like you’re twelve?” The venom spewed from her mouth like a reflex. She didn’t know why. She didn’t find him unpleasant, and she didn’t know him well enough to hate him. He hadn’t even said anything

to annoy her in the two hours they'd been out that night. In fact, truthfully, he didn't even look like a twelve year-old at all, but maybe eighteen, twenty on a good day, clean-shaven and gentle-faced as he was. He seemed so untouched by the world.

"I'm twenty-seven, thanks," he said.

"Maybe grow some chin hair then?"

His hand moved to rub his chin. "Believe me, I can grow plenty of chin hair if I wanted to." He had to lean toward her, scooting his bar stool a bit closer to avoid shouting over the noise, couples out on dates, a group of girls shrieking with laughter around one boy wearing white sequins.

"Let me guess," she said. "You want to get married?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

"Did you tell her that?"

"Probably. But in a general way. I didn't pop the question or anything."

Jodie shook her head. "What's wrong with you freaks?"

He just stared at her. "What's wrong with *you*?"

She huffed. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong with me."

"You're so angry."

"I'm *not* angry." She folded her arms over her chest. "Tell you what – I just tell people the truth. People don't like to hear the truth."

He pointed at her, his finger wagging slightly. "You're so bitter, jaded. You're statuesque almost, a strange approximation of a woman. Like you're stiffened by your own spite."

She laughed out loud. "Who talks like that?"

"I'm going to write a poem about you." He smiled then, which was both inquisitive and genuine. The unimaginable grace it must have taken not to hold the hostility against her. How could he stand it? It crossed her mind then to ask him why he thought nobody wanted to date her.

Didn't she know the answer already?

He bought her a drink – martini, dry, with an extra olive. He drank an imported beer. They stayed for a while, and wherever Amelia had gone that night, why he'd stayed and Amelia hadn't, Jodie didn't know. It was some drinks, some conversation, a night of company. She was quite sure he hadn't meant it as a date. They were friends, or at least, they would begin to be from that point.

But still, there was a future that might have existed, spawned from that night, those drinks at the bar, with music thumping in their chests and neon lights in their eyes, and those few perfect hours that followed. A man like him – sensitive and tender – he would want a wedding, as much as he liked them, and maybe even a family. Children, in the plural. None of it – the man, the wedding, the children – was anything Jodie had ever wanted, but for that one moment, she allowed the possibility to enter into existence. Maybe she also scowled at it, but it had existed there just the same.

And would anything have ever come of it? Nobody would ever know because just days later, Amelia finally kissed him. She changed her mind, took him in, swept him into her arms, into her bed, into her heart, which was everything he'd always wanted. Just like that, whatever possibility might have existed with Jodie was wiped clean away with that kiss.

But Jodie had no plight to argue. She couldn't say she liked him first. She couldn't say she liked him better, or even that she liked him more. As much as she loathed to admit it, she just liked him. To a ridiculous degree. That was all she knew.

THE APARTMENT WAS BIG AND EMPTY WITHOUT PIPER. SHE WAS a tiny, bubbly woman with hair cut sharp and dyed bright. Like candy, she caused toothaches. She was fully grown but the size of a teenager – an explosion of energy in all forms, including the mess she left around when she was there. Jodie would miss it, in a way,

her pillows and pink furry blankets, slippers shaped like purple elephants, her syrupy soda in the fridge and the sticky rings it left on the countertops, a sort of fingerprint she left behind. Piper wouldn't be married for seven more months, but lately, the only time Jodie saw her was when she stopped by to grab some clothes or a DVD, and ran back out to her fiancé's place. The idea being that she should wait until the wedding night to move in with him – the wholesome little Catholic girl that her grandmother thought she was – but that was more a formality than anything. She already had most of her things packed.

Jodie was reading on the couch when Piper burst into the apartment, bringing the wind with her, the scent of fallen leaves and a hint of rain. Tom followed behind, tall and nervous. Jodie made men nervous. It was always a wonder to her – and a little amusing – that she could make such a burly, giant of a man nervous.

Piper ran up the stairs, leaving Tom in the center of the room. He nodded and Jodie nodded back, the mutual acknowledgment of each other's presence. This was the part she hated. Was she supposed to stop reading? Was she supposed to entertain him? Make jokes? Her roommate's fiancé – it was an odd, forced kind of friendship. The walls of the apartment were paper thin. She'd even heard them having sex before. Once you'd heard someone having sex, you could never really get it out of your mind when you saw them again. It was never as appealing or amusing as one might imagine. People always sounded stupid having sex, and looked even more stupid, with their faces all contorted and expressive. On the occasion Jodie actually got into bed with a man, she had to close her eyes to keep from being distracted by the faces, the odd look of so much pleasure it was painful. Jodie hadn't had actual sex in a really long time.

Tom shifted his weight, cleared his throat. "You mind if I steal

your girl for the night?"

Jodie shrugged. Did she mind? Didn't she mind? Didn't he already have her? "Sure, have at her," Jodie said. She didn't try to make jokes with Tom like she would Drew – he wasn't the joking type. But he was a good enough guy, and Piper adored him. Jodie was going to be maid of honor in their wedding, next to Amelia and Piper's dozen-or-something sisters. Piper was making the dresses herself – both her own and for the wedding party, clouds of tulle in yellow and purple. They'd all look like Easter eggs.

Piper came downstairs then, a pink tote slung over her shoulder with her pajamas stuffed into it, one pant leg trailing from the back. She dropped the bag on the floor and plopped onto the couch, wrapped her little arms around Jodie's neck, her warm cheek pressed to Jodie's cheek, the overpowering smell of florals and candy lip gloss. Jodie stiffened first, but Piper never made it a choice. She hugged – you didn't get to decline them. She hugged until Jodie relaxed the little bit that she would.

"See you tomorrow, babe."

Jodie hated being called "babe", but Piper never gave her a choice in that either.

And then Piper and Tom were gone with the same quick gust they blew in on. The apartment was far too quiet without her. It was almost worth having him sleep over, at the risk of hearing their animated and eager sex, just to have the presence of human life in the apartment for a night. But even so, how long could it last? They were getting married, starting a family and a life of their own. Jodie had an email from Drew with names and links to Facebook profiles, and on the kitchen table was Amelia's yellow notepad with lines of women and their painfully detailed descriptions. Dozens of faceless strangers sat there demanding a response, a decision, and Jodie didn't want to live with any of them.

Jodie put the news on for background noise, to block the sound of voices echoing through the thin apartment walls. She picked up a magazine, pushed back cushions to fall into – Piper’s big, fluffy cushions. Jodie imagined she would probably take them with her eventually.

She flipped open her magazine – celebrity divorces, how to wear leggings, what to eat for four-hundred calories. Wasn’t she happy enough alone? She certainly wasn’t lonely enough to need just anybody here. And she took that as a good sign. Alone, but not lonely. It was quiet, sure, but it could be nice. Not having to share the shower in the morning. Not having to debate what they’d watch on TV.

She worried though, if she didn’t find a new roommate soon enough, would she start talking to herself? Would she run dialogues of conversations out loud to no one? Maybe she would get a pet. A goldfish? No, something sentient, so she could pretend she wasn’t really talking to herself. Maybe a cat.

A cat? Seriously? When did she start liking cats?

And then, as she sat in her own empty living room with CNN rattling on in the background, her magazine flopped open on her lap, and a whole conversation in her head, she saw it stretched out ahead of her. Every town had that weird old cat lady, the angry woman sitting on her front porch swing, wearing a nightgown and socks, waving a rolled up newspaper at random children to get off of her lawn. No friends, no family, and way too many cats.

Was this how it started?

1.2: things to do before forty

THE DOG DIED. AMELIA HAD HER MOTHER'S DRY-CLEANING in hand, helped herself into the house to drop it off, and there was the animal's body, lying still between the stove and a chewed up gnawing bone, dead on the cold ceramic floor. Amelia couldn't tell at first, so she crouched down low to watch for its breathing. Nothing. She stood again, looked around her mother's empty kitchen, watched for movement, tapped the animal with a gentle toe. Nothing.

She was an old dog, having joined the family when Amelia was fourteen. Amelia never liked animals much, and never cared much for this dog in particular, a chubby Labrador with a mottled beige coat. But death was still death, abrupt and unsettling. Her mother was alone now. Her father was fine; they'd spoken to him on the phone just days ago. But he was working thousands of miles away in Afghanistan. As a retired Air Force mechanic, they hoped he might be finished with the Middle East. They hoped he would be home to stay until the company he worked for started picking up government contracts. This time, he told them it would be a year. He said he could come home for the holidays, though they both knew he couldn't afford that much travel. Amelia could still remember all of his deployments when she was a girl. During

Desert Storm, she had been twelve – her seventh grade class sent care packages with handmade cards, magazines, beef jerky, eye drops, and socks. Now she was a full grown woman and every day there were the news reports. You didn't need to be in combat – didn't even need to be a soldier at all – doctors, reporters, translators, travelers were killed all the time by children who looked ordinary but had bombs strapped to their chests, or in helicopter crashes, shot down, spinning out of the sky like pinwheels gleaming in the sun. She tried not to think about any of it, until death with its abrupt and unsettling persistence showed up right there at her feet. An old dog, dead.

Amelia started to cry. She set the dry-cleaning over a dining room chair and wiped at her eyes furiously with the back of her wrist. Her mother wasn't home yet from The Lotus, so no one was even home when it happened. The poor thing had died alone. Suddenly Amelia felt guilty for not spending more time with her, for being too self-involved as a teenager, for not taking her on more walks, for not playing fetch. She never liked dogs, but still, she could have played fetch a time or two.

She didn't know what to do, so she called Drew. "Can you come over to my mom's?" She gasped and sniffled into her cell phone. "Lady is dead."

Drew's apartment wasn't very far away. She'd heard him rustling into his jacket before even hanging up his phone, and minutes later he showed up, jacket undone, shoes untied and hair unbrushed. In fact, from the pillow creases on his face, it looked like he'd been napping. She wasn't sure if he had the smallest clue about what to do with a dead dog, but his being there was a form of help in itself. "Oh, Melie," he said near her ear as he slipped his arms around her, pressing their bodies close.

They sat down at the kitchen table, as far away from the dead dog as they could while still being in the same room. Drew sat

beside her, held her hand, and she turned away from the dog to look at him instead. His gentle brown eyes were narrow and inquisitive as he stared at it, a fingernail between his teeth as he thought. Amelia figured he was probably composing a poem about the fragility of life, or the arresting poignancy of death. Or maybe he was just wondering what to do with the body.

They had a wedding to go to that evening. Her mother had planned on finishing up paperwork at the spa and leaving Mindy in charge for the day. Amelia still had to shower and do her own hair, and she wondered if they had the time to take care of the dog and still make it to the wedding. She tried her mother's phone, but there was no answer, which likely meant she was already driving.

It wasn't very long before Claire made it home. As she stepped into the house, Amelia broke the news. "Mom," Amelia said. "Lady is dead."

Claire went straight into the kitchen, heels clicking on the stone tile. She stood over the dog for approximately forty-five seconds, a blank expression on her face. "She was so old," Claire finally said. They were all silent then for another moment, as if they were each wondering if they should say something. A prayer? Should Drew recite a poem? But Claire just pursed her lips into a slight frown, nodded her head once firmly, then turned to the coffee pot, pulling out a filter full of old, wet coffee grounds. "Will you call Corbin for me, sweetie? Only if he's not busy. Tell him I'll pay double his regular wage."

Corbin. Amelia cringed a little.

"Well, we can't leave her lying here while we're gone," Claire insisted.

That wasn't the problem. Corbin worked for her parents, offering massage therapy at The Lotus, though in the years he'd worked for them, he'd become more of a family friend than an employee. Amelia couldn't say she was angry with Corbin. He

didn't exactly do anything wrong. It had been a couple of years now. She never said she cared about him – she wasn't even sure what she felt for him at all, except taken aback most of the time and overwhelmed. No one had ever presented it so openly before, and so earnestly – the way they'd gotten together, exactly two times, and then he casually went into some metaphysical discourse about how his life was his own and his feelings for her were separate and undefined. He'd said, "I'll always be honest with you, Amelia, but I don't want to possess you. And I don't mind if you want to keep seeing your little friend." They were at the spa, on his massage table, their second and last time together. Her panties were still around her ankles and she was so blindsided by it all, the only response she could offer was to come to Drew's defense. First, she and Drew had not been seeing each other yet back then, and second, Drew was not *little* – he was perfectly average-sized for a man, and while he might not have a rock hard yoga body, he did keep himself healthy. He played golf.

Honesty, when presented with it in all its stark nakedness, only felt harsh and unpleasant. And the most outrageous thing about it was that her parents were right about him. Corbin was completely honest, to the core. He meant every single word of it, metaphysical bullshit and all.

Amelia hesitated, but finally did pick up her phone anyway and scrolled through the names. She could see Drew fidget in her peripheral vision. "You have his number stored in your phone?"

Drew never liked Corbin. Amelia had never even told him about the mistaken tryst, but she wondered if maybe he suspected it anyway. It was so slight a thing. She hadn't even known his name the first time they were together. They were a disaster, and it was so long before she and Drew had gotten together that she just didn't know how to bring it up. She shrugged. "He works for my parents."

When Claire left the room, Drew said, "Your mother hates me. Why wouldn't she just ask me to do it?"

"You need to get ready too." Amelia reached out to his hand. "She just doesn't want you to go to a wedding having just buried a dog."

They both knew that thought hadn't crossed her mother's mind in the least.

"No," Drew said, standing up, sending a ripple across the surface of an oil candle on the table, his eyes alight with both complaint and purpose. "I can bury a dog." He took off his jacket and hung it on the chair, taking stock of the room. In his striped polo shirt and jeans, he looked more like Clark Kent than Superman, but his assertion was impressive. Amelia didn't know what to say. She set down her phone.

"What can we wrap her in?" he asked.

Amelia went to get Lady's blanket, which happened to be one of Amelia's old childhood blankets, a cotton weave in blue and white, worn ratty over the years.

Drew laid out the blanket on the floor and rolled Lady inside it. He picked up the eighty pound dog in both arms, and Amelia went to get the door for him.

Amelia picked the spot, in the back corner of the yard, underneath an apple tree. Drew got a shovel from the shed and started digging, stomping his heel down on top of the blade and ripping up the ground. The midday sun was strong, and even Amelia began to feel dewy in the heat. Drew swiped the back of his hand across his forehead. Amelia went to get him a glass of iced tea.

When Claire came downstairs, Amelia was still watching him work, the sharp drive of the shovel into the ground, the leverage to pop the dirt up, two capable arms tossing the earth away. The hole was about five feet long and two feet deep already.

"You know," Claire said to her in a hushed tone. "We only have four hours until the wedding."

Amelia shrugged. "He's almost done. And he won't take as long to get ready anyway."

Claire stared at the hole, taking slow, steady breaths. If she was upset, Amelia knew her mother wouldn't show it. Claire walked off quickly, and returned with a Frisbee, a mangled one with toothmarks in it. "Put this with her, will you? I need to curl my hair." Claire turned to go back inside.

When he'd finished the hole and placed Lady's body inside, Amelia knelt down with a small gardening trowel and helped him scoop some of the dirt inside. When they were finished, Amelia placed Lady's Frisbee on top of the dirt mound, a headstone.

They stood together at the foot of the grave. She placed a hand on Drew's back, his shirt moist with work, smelling of salty sweat and the earth. She leaned her head to his shoulder. "Let's go get you cleaned up," she said.

THEY ALL MADE IT TO THE WEDDING ON TIME. THE THREE OF THEM sat at their appointed places around a large round table, family of the bride. The hall was decorated in white lights and ivory. Stringed miniature Chinese lanterns were drawn across the room, crossing each other in a glowing web. Glass bowls sat in the center of each table with floating candles in them, ivory rose petals scattered around. Amelia wore a dress that Piper had made for her, just as strange as any of Piper's creations, ocean blue, with material so airy it somehow managed to lift and float when she moved.

Somehow it turned out that Amelia was the last of all her cousins to remain unmarried. She and Drew sat with her mother, enduring her nostalgic engagement and wedding stories. Amelia's parents were the perfect couple. Alan and Claire Bradshaw – they were so happy together, everyone said so. They'd known each

other since they were fourteen years old, high school sweethearts, married for twenty-nine years. And here they were at yet another wedding, recounting the story of how her parents got engaged. "When your father proposed to me, we were at a bonfire..." Claire started the story with her head held high and her hands folded in her lap – there was no dreamy haze in her eyes. It was just history, and she delivered it not like a whimsical memory, but like a classic text that everyone knew. "It was four weeks before graduation. I wasn't going to college, but he was going off for basic training in a few weeks, and after that, we had no idea where. I remember everything about it – the cinders in the fire pit. He said to me, 'I can't do this without you. Come with me – marry me, Claire.' I remember exactly what we were wearing. I used to wear so much color in those days." She glanced down at her dark navy dress. "Now it's all dark, isn't it?" She turned to Amelia then, laying her palm on Amelia hand. "I'm so glad you wear color, sweetie."

Amelia knew this story by heart, the cinders in the fire pit, the very modest chip of a diamond he'd worked odd jobs for months to buy, her father down on one knee. It was the kind of story a woman could let live for generations.

Claire wasn't drinking wine, just a glass of water clutched in both hands. Drew had brought Amelia one glass of wine already, and Amelia sipped it slowly, though she knew she was going to be far too sober for this. "Drew, honey, can we have another?"

At least her mother waited for Drew to leave the table before she started. "Don't you think you two might like something like this?" She waved a hand at the room. The twinkling candles in water, the bad wedding music, nobody dancing except the very old and the children – it was too early, and the rest of them weren't drunk enough yet. The tossed rose petals were already starting to wilt. Amelia could buy all of this at Pottery Barn if she wanted it. "He's a nice enough boy, Amelia."

Nice *enough*? Amelia raised her eyebrows. Sometimes Amelia wondered if there was anyone her mother would oppose her marrying as long as he agreed to provide grandchildren quickly. "Mom, we don't even live together yet."

"I know," Claire said. "Believe it or not, there was a time people got married before they lived together. It's just that you're our only child." Claire tilted her head. "And you're nearly *thirty* now."

"Not *nearly*," Amelia said. Though close enough. It was starting to sink in. Amelia had gray hairs. Two of them. They aged her before her time. One was near her part line, and any time she tried to tuck it underneath, it only rose up again to stand above the rest, pale and defiant.

Claire tapped her fingertips on her water glass, making ripples on the surface. "You know there's a time limit on some things."

Amelia grinned. "You know, Mom, they've got drugs for that now."

"Out of all my siblings, all your father's siblings, we're the only ones without grandchildren now."

"Or there's sperm banks too. You don't even need a man at all to have a baby."

"Well," Claire huffed. "You're just being stubborn."

Drew came back with Amelia's wine, and placed a soft kiss on her cheek. He pointed at the bar. "We were just talking a bit – do you mind?"

Her cousins' husbands, challenging each other's manhood with shots of whiskey – she could smell it on him. "No, go ahead," she said. She didn't want to draw attention to the idea; her mother didn't need another reason to dislike her boyfriend. Claire tapped her fingernails on her water glass, a perfectly polite smile spread across her lips as Drew left the table.

"I'm a big girl," Amelia continued, before her mother could speak first. "I can take care of myself. You'll get your grandbaby someday."

"I know you think it doesn't matter. We just don't want you to be alone is all."

"There's nothing wrong with living alone," Amelia said.

She shouldn't have said it so blunt like that. Her mother flinched. Without the dog now, she was well and truly alone – and Amelia knew she didn't like it. Her mother had been a military wife for the whole of her youth and Amelia knew she measured the time in months and years, units of deployment breaking up the forward momentum of her life. But Amelia couldn't change any of that for her, and Amelia was happy now. Two times before she'd lived with a man, and neither time worked out very well. Now she had friends – she had a best friend who was also her boyfriend and who was plenty more than just *nice enough*. She glanced to Drew at the bar. "I'm not alone," Amelia said.

Drew saw her looking, smiled, and started to walk back then. Amelia looked at her mother, an inhale, a whole conversation with her eyes. *Enough*. Amelia's hand rested flat on the table and her mother reached over to pat it. It made her feel like a child.

"Okay," Claire said, nodding to Drew as he took his place beside Amelia again, rising from her own seat with a sigh. "Well," she said. "I'm going to turn in early, I think. You two have a good time then."

Amelia felt bad – too many bad jokes about sperm banks? Was it the dead dog? Was it being on her own at a family wedding when everyone else had a sweetheart at their side? Amelia wished she could be the daughter her mother hoped for. Why couldn't she just go and marry her sweet boyfriend whom she loved? Many worse things had been asked of women before. "You don't have to go, Mom."

"I do, sweetie." She waved her hand at the room. "This is all making me tired." She stood and leaned down to kiss Amelia's head. "But you have a good time, okay?"

Claire waited for an answer.

“We will. Goodnight, Mom.”

When her mother had gone, they both went to the bar. Amelia had seven cousins, and they were all girls. All of them married already apart from Amelia. They all had babysitters for the night, and Amelia caught up with them while Drew did a few more shots with their husbands. Amelia knew he wouldn't remember being so drunk in the morning. He turned back to her occasionally, giving her another glass of red wine and a kiss. The guys all had their suit jackets off, ties undone, cheeks flushed with whiskey. Amelia's cousins were eager to drink too after so many years of babies and breastfeeding. Amelia hadn't intended to get drunk, but she had enough to relax.

Drew slid his hand around her waist and nuzzled his face into the curve of her neck, his other hand holding a shot glass in front of her, mixed tones of brown and beige. He spoke into her ear, “It's called a screaming orgasm, you want one?”

Her head was already buzzing, and her pulse warmed at the thought of a screaming orgasm. She turned around to see him grinning. “Yes, thank you.” She didn't mean the drink, but she took it anyway.

She giggled as his placed sloppy kisses over her collar bone, but her laugh was stunted as she caught sight of her cousin Bella doing shots with all of the guys. It didn't surprise her that Bella could hold her whiskey with the men, but somehow, after all these years, Amelia still bristled with contempt at the sight of her. Especially in that curvy black gown, and standing so close to Drew. Bella had given Amelia's high school boyfriend a blowjob in the back seat of his car after their senior prom. That hadn't been the first time Lenny Hutchins cheated on Amelia, and it wouldn't be the last, but as far as she knew, that had been the only time Bella ever betrayed her. Even though it happened over ten years ago, Amelia wasn't

sure that was the kind of thing a person could ever really get over.

Bella came closer, looping her arm through her husband's arm. They were all packed in closely near the bar, and Bella had taken a place right next to Drew. She raised her glass to them all, and Amelia couldn't hear what she was saying to them over the noise. Bella had two children now, and for all Amelia knew, she seemed happily married. People grew up, people changed, people moved on. It had been a lifetime ago. They were all happy now, weren't they? Amelia took a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled it. Before she'd started studying yoga, she hadn't been so aware of how insufficiently she breathed sometimes. *Pranayama*, life force, the body's need for nourishing oxygen. It calmed her. Before turning back to talk to her other cousins, she slipped her fingers into Drew's hand.

He was a good find, her cousins told her. Amelia already knew that. She'd never denied it. How many of these family weddings had he been to now, and they still weren't engaged yet themselves? He knew almost everyone by name. He'd been invited to their bachelor parties and weddings, he'd met their children, been to their babies' first birthday parties. The things Amelia's mother wanted from her were no different than the things any of their mothers wanted. Parents did that – they imposed their wants on their children, like their children should want those things already themselves. Amelia's cousins told her the truth – it wouldn't appease her parents if she got engaged. Sure, maybe for a little while. But next, they'd want a wedding, they'd want a grandchild, and after they got one, they'd want another. And what comes next? After one grandchild, two, three? Her cousins hadn't gotten that far themselves, but they were all scared to find out.

Amelia couldn't remember when she'd lost hold of Drew's hand. They'd been standing back to back most of the night, his hand on her shoulder occasionally, a whisper in her ear, or his laugh among the chorus of drunken laughter. Then another voice

spoke from behind her, and when she turned, Drew was gone.

"Your man just threw up in the bathroom." Amelia turned to find another husband of yet another cousin – she didn't even remember his name.

"Where is he now?"

"Outside," he said.

"Oh, Lord." Amelia sighed hard. She was tipsy herself, balancing on sharp heels and holding her floaty dress to her thighs as she stepped out the front doors of the reception hall. Across a large grassy lawn, speeding headlights flashed past on the highway. It wasn't very late yet but the sky was dark already, the way fall starts to steal light from the evenings more and more each day. It was chilly, having dropped fifteen degrees since they left the house. September did that. But she hadn't grabbed a jacket because she'd planned to steal Drew's suit jacket later. She should have brought it out with her – and then it came to mind that she'd put her wallet and phone in her mother's purse at dinner.

She stopped walking. "Crap," she said, balling her fists up and groaning at the sky. A man smoking a cigarette against a stone pillar looked over at her. She tucked her arms around her body and continued.

Drew sat on a stone bench a few feet down the sidewalk, where cars pulled up to let guests out or pick them up. He leaned forward heavy on his hands and took deep inhales of the cool fall air. "You look spent," she said.

He nodded. "Sorry, I don't know what they were giving me."

Shots were shots, and he'd done too many of them. It probably wouldn't matter what kind. Maybe he hadn't eaten enough? Maybe he was trying too hard to impress them? That seemed more likely a reason.

He held out his keys to her. "Can we go? I'll make it up to you, I promise."

She'd been drinking all night too. "I can't drive yet, I just had three glasses of wine."

He groaned, wrapped his arms around his stomach, and rocked.

"Let me borrow your phone?"

Drew handed her the phone. She sorted through numbers in her head. She tapped the screen, and it brought up his call list. Pacing the sidewalk, she scrolled through names in his phone book, but she didn't know any of them who weren't at the wedding already. She didn't want to ask for a ride and ruin anyone else's night. She didn't want to call her mother back out again, and she especially didn't want her to see Drew in such a condition. Piper would be all the way out at Tom's, and Jodie would give them the biggest stink about making her drive all the way out there.

It didn't make sense that Jodie's name stuck out from the list, but somehow it did. Amelia counted the calls from Jodie. There were dozens, listed several times a week, incoming and outgoing. And one missed call notice from just a couple hours ago. No message though.

Jodie. Her name on that call log set heavy in Amelia's gut. She didn't like it, for no real reason she could pinpoint. Maybe it was the time they spent together, without her. She just didn't like it. The envy, the fear, it welled up through her body, to her fingertips, hovering over the "clear" button, and she pressed it.

Gone.

It was like Jodie had never called at all.

Amelia had never done that before. Not even with Lenny. Amelia turned back to Drew, still sitting on the stone bench, except now the groom had come out to join him, with his tuxedo jacket off and his shirt untucked. All the undone tuxedos and women in bare feet, standing outside a function hall in the late hours of the night – it reminded Amelia of that senior prom. That time, and all those

other times. If she'd have checked up on him sooner, maybe he wouldn't have fooled her for so long.

But Drew wasn't Lenny. And this wasn't her phone. And Jodie was their friend. So Amelia exhaled, her bare arms starting to shiver. There was one person she could try. It surprised her that she actually remembered Corbin's number after all. He lived so close to them anyway, and if she didn't call a cab, or bribe someone else to leave the wedding early, it was the only number she could think of.

Corbin, this time of night, would either be grading essays from his philosophy lectures, or out screwing. He didn't do relationships, exactly, so you couldn't call them "girlfriends." But Amelia also knew that Corbin was the only person on the planet without a cell phone, so if he was out screwing, he wouldn't answer.

He answered. "I'm so sorry to bother you," she said. "My mom left, and I'm drunk, and Drew is trashed, and we kind of need a ride."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

When Corbin finally arrived, Amelia felt conflicted about where to sit. Drew didn't like Corbin enough to want to sit up front, so he slid straight into the back seat, rolling his woozy head against the headrest. It would have been impolite to sit in the back with Drew, and leave Corbin up front alone like he was their chauffeur – that was not how she'd meant it at all – and yet it seemed just as impolite to leave Drew alone in the back, especially as sick as he was. She stood outside the car long enough that Corbin glanced over to her. She got in beside Drew, leaning forward between the seats to say, "I should probably make sure he doesn't throw up."

Corbin nodded, and they went.

Drew crossed his arms and slumped. Corbin's car was a rusty white Chevy Cavalier that must have been fifteen years old, stick

shift which he drove roughly, and suspension that felt like being pulled over potholes in a kiddie wagon. Amelia reached over to squeeze Drew's knee. "You're not gonna throw up, are you?"

He rolled his head – no.

"Your place or his?" Corbin said from the front.

"Mine," she said, then realized that her mother had her keys too. Drew had a set of her house keys though. "You have keys, right?"

He rooted through his pocket and pulled them out.

Corbin pulled up at the street in front of Amelia's townhouse. "Thanks for the ride," Drew mumbled, quickly, and got out of the car.

"Thank you for that," Amelia said.

Corbin turned himself in the front seat to glance back at her. "No problem," he said. "It wasn't that far."

"Well I'll owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything," he said.

Why was he so generous? It wasn't natural – people weren't like that. It only made her feel like he wanted something. She pursed her lips. "Fine," she said, breaking into an anxious laugh.

He bowed his head lightly. "Namaste, Amelia."

Drew was inside already, upstairs in the master bathroom. She came up to the closed door, not because she wanted to hear him puking, but to make sure he didn't die. Was that possible? That in his drunkenness, he might stumble and knock himself out, end up choking on his own vomit? She shivered. "Are you okay?" she asked through the closed door.

He opened it a crack, and she let herself in. The faucet was running, and he splashed his face, looking up at himself with disappointment as drops of water hung from his nose and chin. He smelled like toothpaste.

"You feel better?"

"No, not really," he said. "I bet he got a kick out of seeing me like this."

"Who, Corbin? He doesn't care."

"He's probably mocking me."

"Corbin doesn't mock people."

"Well isn't he a saint?" Drew slumped slowly to the tile floor, his back pressed against the wall, cornered between the sink and the toilet.

"Corbin is *not* perfect."

"I know how your parents like him."

She sat next to him. The tile was cold on her bare legs. "They like you too," she said. At least, she figured her dad did.

"I'm sorry, Melie. Never mind. Did I do anything really stupid?"

"Not that I saw," she said.

But had Amelia done anything stupid? Erasing Jodie's call? She felt so petty for it. It was worrying how often Jodie's name came up lately. Amelia worried about how love could be so changeable, that she could be so adored for a time and then just as easily forgotten.

She was sure he hadn't started the night with two shirt buttons undone, though she remembered he hadn't worn a tie. Now the collar of his shirt hung open, just a peek of chest hair showing. It made her want to touch him there. But he reached out to her face instead, running a thumb along her cheekbone. "*I tuoi occhi sono dolci come il miele,*" he said to her.

He rarely spoke Italian – only when he was drunk, or trying to woo her panties off, or both. But when he did, it reminded Amelia of a story his mother told her once after having had a little too much champagne, of the summer of 1978 and a mysterious Italian man with an accent that made every conversation feel like a song. Drew would never meet his real father, but it must have been genetic why he'd become a poet, or why he felt inclined to study

three languages in college, or how he pulled off the charm without sounding too pompous or too false. Otherwise Amelia might have suspected that he only remembered the lines he could use to coax her into bed. "I bet that doesn't sound as good in English."

"Your eyes are sweet as honey."

Her heart fluttered a little, against its better judgment. "Well, I guess that's alright too."

She didn't trust charm. His smile melted her heart, and she wanted to believe. She really did. But they were all charming, weren't they? And she fell for it, again and again and again.

But she shouldn't have cleared that missed call. Her conscience felt the weight of a million lies, even though there was just this one. Amelia hated lies. "Jodie called for you," she said, in one solid exhale.

"Oh, what'd she want?"

Amelia shrugged. "It was just a missed call. I pressed the wrong button and it was gone."

Drew grinned at her. "She wanted to say she'd marry me, you know, since you won't."

It was a joke, but she tensed anyway. "She'd eat you alive, you know. You're too sweet for her." She took his hand and held it still in her lap.

"I want to marry you, Melie," he said. His eyes were heavy and half closed.

She wasn't ignorant. And she wasn't oblivious. It wasn't like she didn't know that this was what he'd been after for as long as he'd known her. It felt different when he said it, like he was actually talking about marrying her, specifically, and not just picking an item off some generic checklist: Things To Do Before Forty. But did he really know what he'd be getting himself into? Once they believed in it, it would fade into something ordinary and taken for granted. He would lose interest and move on. They always did.

But sometimes, it felt so clear and real that she almost started to believe in it herself.

He smiled with his eyes closed. She knew she needed to get them to bed before he fell asleep on the tiled bathroom floor. She sighed. "Why don't you say that again some time when you're sober?"

1.3: likely to fail

IT HAD BEEN A LONG NIGHT, A MIDNIGHT LABOR BLED INTO an early morning delivery. Jodie reached the parking lot with a blinding sunrise in her eyes, harsh and golden, as she dug through her bag to find her car keys. She was tired, and in the glare, she could barely make out his shape, but she knew that walk anywhere: Gary Berges, striding with force, with purpose, like he owned this whole parking lot.

Or maybe he was just angry. “Jodie,” he bellowed. “What did you do?”

“Oh hell,” she said with a slanted smile, “What *did* I do?”

“The fucking spot. Your name is on my fucking parking spot.” And then she knew what he was talking about. Their parking lot had been repaved, and Jodie had run into the building's owner that day. She stood there with the paving crew for a moment as they took notes on how to divide up the assigned parking spaces. She might have mentioned which space she wanted. That spot, the one away from the oak trees, the only spot in the whole lot that didn't get shat on with sap every fall. She hadn't even considered anyone else might want it, that anyone else even noticed that it was a good spot at all.

“Dammit, Jodie,” Berges said. “You're twenty-nine and you drive a piece-of-shit Taurus. I've been parking in that spot for ten

years. What do you care which spot you have?"

"I hate washing my car just as much as anybody." She put a finger to his shoulder, a tap. "And besides, I'm not stealing it. It was nobody's before, and now it'll be mine. That's not stealing."

She began to lean against her car, but stopped before the dewy windows soaked her back. Other cars filed into the parking lot for early appointments, people carrying coffee and rubbing their eyes. Berges folded his arms across his chest. "I can't believe you did that," he said, pausing. His strong, angry features softened and he laughed. "No, actually, I can believe it."

She'd known Berges for five years now. She first met him at the hospital, in the cafeteria. She knew him before he was divorced, before he got old. He was old now, or at least older. His eyes had become lined and his hair was starting to speckle with gray, thinning a bit at his temples. Maybe divorce did that to people?

She threw her hands up in the air and felt a smirk spread across her lips. "You don't have to get your panties in a twist about it. I really didn't. It just fell in my lap."

He looked down at her lap, then back up with a doubtful squint in his eyes. "I bet it did."

"You're still coming to my brother's wedding with me?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"What's the difference?"

His laugh was like a bark.

She smiled. "Free bar," she said.

Jodie drove home, stumbled up to her bedroom, set her alarm, tossed her scrubs onto the floor – not bothering to shower – and fell into bed in her underwear and a thin white tank top. Three hours passed in a blink. She closed her eyes and opened them again, that dreamless state of semi-consciousness, and then her phone was ringing. Piper sang downstairs in the kitchen. Jodie put a pillow over her head but that didn't stop the phone from ringing or Piper

from singing. The cracked blinds let in too much bright afternoon sunlight, and outside the window some bird chirped a shrill song. She grabbed her phone. She couldn't even read the caller ID, but answered anyway. "What?"

"What are you doing?" Her brother. Eric had almost unbelievable timing, that his calls came so early on those mornings she had been up all night. She had her alarm set. She could have slept for thirty more minutes, but he stole that from her. She was awake now. She held the phone to her face, her hands still smelling of surgical soap.

"Doing? I'm sleeping," she said. "Long night."

"Oh, sorry," he said. "But you're coming? Right? You know what day this is?"

"Yes I know what day this is."

"Are you bringing somebody?"

"Oh geeze, yes, don't you worry. I found some stupid idiot to come to your wedding with me."

Eric laughed merrily. "Did you have to pay him?"

Jodie wanted to reach through the phone and hit him. She wondered if Ruth was there. Was she laughing too? Jodie hadn't met her future sister-in-law more than three times, and she didn't know if she liked her much. "Oh, shut up already," Jodie said to her brother.

THE WEDDING WAS NINETY MINUTES AWAY IN LANSING. SHE and Berges drove together, and it never occurred to her that they had so much to talk about, or that they knew so much about each other. Their acquaintance was formed in the hallways and parking lots of the medical complex they shared, or grabbing lunches in the hospital cafeteria, or meeting for a candy bar from a vending machine. She'd known him when she was still in her residency, since before his daughter was a teenager. She'd known him in the

months after the divorce blew up, and she'd seen it turn him disillusioned and jaded. The divorce hadn't been his idea.

They had the afternoon to kill before the wedding. Jodie wore jeans and a gray cardigan, and felt too plain for the hair that Piper had done for her before she left, half a French twist with an explosion of curls erupting from the back. Jodie knew she wouldn't be able to do her hair on her own later. As they sat down for lunch in the hotel restaurant, Jodie noticed Berges had gotten a fresh haircut for the occasion. She felt honored, but she didn't say anything.

"I've never been here before," Berges said. The room was mostly empty. Nearly two in the afternoon, and most people had eaten lunch already. The waitresses were dressed in black and white. There was a standing wood stove in the middle of the room that wasn't being used, and stone statues in each of the corners with large, bulging eyes. Berges sat in front of one, and it made her feel like there was another person sitting behind them. But Jodie got the feeling Berges meant that he'd never been to Lansing before, and not just the little hotel restaurant specifically.

"Oh, it's a hole really," Jodie said. "Hell if I know why he wanted to move here. Why does everyone move to such holes? I never see Piper anymore. Her fiancé, he lives out in the middle of nowhere. He lives next to a goddamn field of cows."

Berges chuckled. A waitress brought their food. Jodie unrolled a cloth napkin and started in on her salad. She was talking too much. "Shouldn't you talk about your child or something?"

She was half kidding, but he started anyway. "Hazel, she's good. She finally got her braces off last week. Braces I paid for, but of course her mother wouldn't acknowledge that much..." He went on about Hazel, how she placed second at her track meet last weekend, how she was getting a C in algebra, and how her bitch mother didn't stop yapping the whole meet about how he never

kept up with Hazel's homework when he had her. He went on about their house which, which he had picked out when they bought it, but was granted to her in the end because it was closer to Hazel's school. He talked about visitation settlements and lawyers and bitterness, going on almost solidly until their food came. And then while they ate, all through the meal, to the point she imagined even the statues sitting behind him had become bored.

AFTER LUNCH, JODIE SLIPPED ON HER GOWN AND CLUMSY HEELS, and since her hair was already done, she went to find her brother. She rapped lightly on the door of a small conference room before entering, and Eric was inside, standing at a window, already dressed in a black tuxedo. "Okay, let me look at you then," she said. She turned him around. His tie was neat enough. She inspected for lint – there wasn't any. She squinted at his face. He'd started growing a little goatee and she wasn't sure what she thought of it. It startled her how much she missed him now that he was so far away.

"You look nice, Jodie."

"Eh," she said. It was just a simple black gown, with a wide, scooped neckline that hung lower than she'd imagined it would when it was still on the hanger. Piper had begged to make her something to wear, but Jodie declined. She'd seen some of the strange contraptions Piper had dressed Amelia in before, and Jodie had no intentions of being Piper's fashion experiment. Jodie went to Kohl's instead.

"But you should get some sun," he added. In all that black, Jodie's pale skin appeared so white it cast a bluish tint.

"Sun gives you cancer," she said.

Seeing the two of them, all grown up and dressed for his wedding, with their degrees they'd earned and paid for themselves, with their careers, you never would have guessed they

came from such a screwed up family. Whatever dysfunction that caused Jodie to swear off marriage and children indefinitely only seemed to make her big brother want it more. Like he had to prove he could make it work. It was going to be a very small wedding – neither she nor Eric were close to either side of their mangled family anymore. Their parents would be here with new spouses – third for their mother and fourth for their father – but none of the half or step siblings had been invited. Hopefully nobody would argue.

Jodie didn't understand what the fuss was about with all this wedding stuff, but she wasn't going to stomp on his dreams either. She was proud of him, just as he had always been proud of her. He was the only stability she'd ever known.

"So, your guy seems alright, are you seeing him?" Eric's voice was entirely too optimistic.

"No," she said. "Absolutely not. He's just a friend." Friend was an odd word for their arrangement. It was more like playful adversaries.

"You should bring him over for dinner sometime."

"Ehhh," Jodie said.

"And you should try to get to know Ruth. She's nice. You might like her."

He really liked Ruth – Jodie could tell that much. There was a zest about him with Ruth that was never there with Amelia. Ruth was nice and didn't have much of a sense of humor – neither did her brother, really. They suited each other. He'd told Jodie how they met, the very same week he moved away. It must have been only days after he broke up with Amelia. "I'll know her eventually," Jodie said. "Give me time, it was fast."

"It wasn't that fast."

"Fast enough. Did you meet her and propose the next week?"

Jodie chuckled out loud. But he wasn't laughing. They stared at

each other. "I knew her already, when Amelia and I broke up."

Jodie mulled over the information. "Wait, what? Back up the train. You mean, *knew her*, knew her?"

Eric didn't answer.

"Holy shit!" Jodie slapped her brother's arm. "You cheated on Amelia?" Jodie waited for some clarification, some gesture from him that she'd misunderstood.

"Cheated? I don't know." He stalled, shuffling in his place. "That sounds worse than what it was. We were falling apart already. It was just a matter of saying it out loud at that point. Don't tell her though. You know how she is."

Jodie wasn't sure what he meant by that – how was she? Unlucky? The wrong one? Jodie shook her head. She wouldn't tell his secret.

"But that doesn't matter," he added. "She's happy now, right? With that poet? Does he wear a beret and carry around little quill pens?" Eric's hearty laugh filled the room, which caused a little ball of offense to rile inside Jodie.

"It's not like that. He's Drew, he's okay."

Eric was still laughing. "Are you part of his fan club or something?"

She huffed at him. "Fuck you, nobody's talking about your scrapbooking hobby."

"I don't scrapbook, little sis. I'm a historian." Eric slung his arm around her shoulders and led them out of the room. "No worries – they're happy, I'm sure. We're happy. Everybody's happy."

Jodie nodded, full of truth. Drew and Amelia, yes, they were indeed happy.

SO ERIC GOT MARRIED. JODIE KNEW IT WAS SOMETHING HER BROTHER had wanted for a long time. He held his new bride's hands on the cobblestone patio of the hotel, with fountains

sputtering nearby and the hot September sun setting in their eyes. It was more foreign than Jodie could even imagine. She hadn't ever wanted to get married, never really had the patience for a long-term boyfriend, she never even had a date to the prom.

After the ceremony, she sat with Berges on the patio drinking free wine. The sun had set and the heat dispersed, moist fabric along her back turning cold and sending a chill through her body. She clutched her arms.

"You cold?" Berges said. "I'm not wearing mine." She didn't answer him, but he moved behind her to slide his suit jacket over her shoulders, hanging loose around her. He took a deep look at her breasts as he stood over her for that moment. She didn't care. It made her laugh more than anything. She hardly felt like they were even her breasts at all, in that dress, with her hair all wound up on top of her head and curls that were starting to lose their spring. Jodie could hardly walk in the heels she wore, and she wasn't in the habit of being gawked at by her dates – what few dates she had.

She always found it uncomfortable knowing a cosmetic surgeon. When Berges looked at her, did he wonder what he would fix? Would he soften her nose or lipo some jiggle out of her thighs? He was someone who quite literally fixed broken people, misshapen people, and because it paid his bills better, a lot of people who just weren't as perfect as they wished they were. What did he think when he saw her, a gold mine of work? Or was she beyond repair?

His smile was more eager than it had any right to be. "Jodie, you have tits, who knew?"

Bullshit he didn't know she had tits. He'd been sizing up her chest for five years.

"You're starting to bald a little," she told him.

His hand shot up to his forehead. "I am not."

"Here." She pointed.

"I am not," he said again.

"Do you use hair product?"

"No. And this is my hair."

"Does it work? The hair product? Can it really grow new hair?"

His rusty brown hair was short, but he wore the inch-long tufts combed forward to cover the receding parts. She ran her fingers underneath one tuft of hair. His scalp was warm.

"Get your hands out of my hair," he said. He leaned back away from her in his chair. He scowled, distinguished lines creasing over his brow, and she just took them in. There was something admirable about this point in a man's life, the point he first started to show his age, the point he was indisputably no longer a boy. Those lines were new on him too; she couldn't remember them there when they first met. He must have been in his early thirties then. "Scientifically, no," he said. "It just strengthens the living follicles to slow loss."

"Okay then," she said. "Shut up and let's get this dance out of the way already." He'd insisted the whole drive that since she brought him all this way, she at least owed him one dance. Berges loved to dance. He danced to grocery store muzak while picking up frozen meals for dinner. He danced through hospital corridors in his surgery scrubs. She'd never asked him, but she was quite sure he imagined himself John Travolta while he did it. So she led him through the guests, trying to find a spot not too near where her brother was dancing with his new bride. It was a slower song, and for that, Jodie was grateful he wouldn't have a chance to whip out any of his more elaborate moves.

She hadn't had a chance to say much to either of them after the ceremony besides a quick congratulations as the wedding photographer corralled them in and out of groupings for the photos. As they danced now, she noticed Eric was significantly

taller than Ruth, so that when they stood together, her head fit right underneath his chin. It was still strange for Jodie to see him with a new woman. She always thought Amelia, tall and delicate as she was, seemed a more natural fit with her gangly brother. Ruth was so different – a mousy woman, small and sturdy with wispy hair and breeding hips. How long had her brother known that Amelia wasn't what he wanted?

As she and Berges settled into an empty space on the patio, Berges took her into his hands. One hand held hers and the other snuck underneath the large jacket to hold her at the small of her back. She held her breath for a moment. She didn't expect to be so stunned by his touch – confident yet gentle, so sure and so precise. Of course it was; he was a surgeon after all. A surgeon who danced. They kept just a little bit of space between them, so that when they moved, her chest would sometimes brush up against his. Among so many foreign things, there was this closeness, this invitation into her personal space. It set her nerves on edge. The music burned her ears, some crooner, a whiny voice like he had a clothespin on his nose. “What *is* this?”

“It's Rufus Wainwright,” Berges said.

“Oh God, it's *awful*.” She sneered, shaking her head. “I have to hate you just for knowing who he is. And for knowing it so *surely*.”

“Heh,” he chuckled. “I only know because Kate liked him.”

Jodie tilted her head. “She would, wouldn't she?”

He wasn't looking at her then, his gaze falling somewhere in the background, unfixed. “I never actually cheated on her, you know?”

As he returned to her, Jodie was caught in his muddy brown eyes, stunned for a moment. There was a small twinkle left there sometimes, as if he hadn't been completely destroyed yet. Jodie nodded. She knew, to some degree. Or at least she knew he'd never crossed that line on her behalf. Sometimes he seemed saddened by it all, and other times he seemed not to care. She wondered, when

Berges saw people getting married, did he think they were making a mistake? She tilted her head toward her brother. "So you think they're doomed then?"

"Nah," he said. "You have to hope not, right? I'd do it again, I think. Some day."

"Get married? Don't you know they say the second is more likely to fail than the first?"

He laughed, bold, like a bark. "You're a ball of sunshine, Ms. Jodie Larsen, you know that?"

She grinned at him. "Well, we can't all walk around with our heads in the clouds."

They drank some more. They danced again. She only owed him one dance, but she gave him a few. After four glasses of wine, Jodie's head was spinning in the clouds. She sometimes forgot how handsome he was, despite the obvious mess he'd made of his life, and despite the abrasive exterior he maintained. It was easy to forget, but he could be lovely sometimes, in the right light. He had strong features and wide, soulful eyes. She always took him for granted, all their play flirting, their verbal sparring. It was never meant to be any more than a game. But she wasn't an eager young med-student anymore. And he wasn't married anymore either.

Jodie was never the type to assume things – especially *romantic* kinds of things. First, because any time they'd blurred those lines before had only been in fun. Second, because he was a pathetic, wreck of a man, even if a handsome one. And third, because she hadn't been wanted for a very long time. So she stayed up late with him, sitting long after most of the other guests had retired to their rooms or gone home, after her brother and his new bride took off to start their new life together. Jodie and Berges stayed out drinking more wine just to avoid that awkward walk back to their separate rooms. She wanted him to say he was tired, or that he'd see her in the morning.

"Last call," the bartender said.

It was even later than she'd realized. Berges tipped up what was left of his wine and swallowed. "Looks like they're kicking us out, Sunshine."

So they got up, and she followed him into the elevator, stood beside him, not quite touching in the quiet space as they traveled up three floors. She felt like she was assuming way too much. She knew she didn't owe him anything, but she hadn't yet decided if she was going to give it anyway. Her nerves were on fire. As they stood in front of her door, across the hallway from his, she fumbled to speak. "Thank you, you know, for coming," she said. "It's not the kind of thing you want to come alone to."

"Coming alone is never as much fun," he said.

She hardly had time to roll her eyes at him before he was kissing her, pressing his mouth to hers, then as she relaxed, gently slipping his tongue inside. It had been so long since she kissed someone that she was sure she'd become rusty. He was thankfully too drunk to notice it. Or maybe they were both too deprived of it to care, two romantic outcasts, fumbling around in the bright hotel hallway until they finally stumbled backwards into her darkened room.

She fumbled with a light switch, which flooded the room in too much light, so she turned it off and left the bathroom light on instead. He slid a hand up her back as he continued to kiss her, tracing the long zipper to the top, then paused there as his fingertips met her skin. "Your skin," he said, barely pulling his lips away from hers to speak. "It's freezing." He didn't seem appalled by it, just surprised.

"Bad circulation," she said. But he had already resumed kissing her neck and unzipping the dress. She went on anyway. "It's not an uncommon condition. I'm taking medication for it."

He breathed near her ear. "Hmmm." He let go of the gown and it fell to the floor. He looked into her eyes. "Relax, will you?"

They moved to the bed, stripping off layers as they went. She tried to recall the last time she'd had actual sex. Two years? Really? Had it been that long? She didn't know where to put her hands, while his hands were fearless, full of her flesh, her breasts, her butt cheeks. He grabbed a handful of thigh and raised her leg around his hip as he leaned her back over the bed.

Berges had taken off all of her clothes as well as most of his own, apart from cotton boxers which she guessed he was waiting for her to do. He held her in his arms. She clung to him out of modesty more than the desire to be intimate. Stripped down to nothing. Her skin might have been cold, but her blood was warm, and her heart still pumped, and she hadn't been touched in so long she might have forgotten she was still a woman at all. But she was, and not just a strange approximation of a woman, but a real, actual woman, who hadn't been made to feel like a woman for a really, really long time.

"Okay," she said out loud. An answer to his long-past question. A green light. Game on.

"Alright then," he said.

She lay on her back with her eyes closed, so not to see what faces he made, if he made them. He took her legs and held them in his hands. It reminded her of how he always asked, *So tell me, any of you girls ever do it in those stirrups?* Which she thought might have turned her off, but instead, with her eyes closed, she imagined them in an examination room on the crackling exam bed paper, her knees spread wide and feet in stirrups. The sex was foggy and rather fast, but not unpleasant. He rolled off of her when he finished with a deep groan.

She turned her head to him. He had a victorious grin on his face. It looked good on him; it reminded her of the spirit he used to have. "Don't look like you've won me over or anything. You just want me to give you that parking spot back."

"That's not why I did this."

"Why then?"

"Because I was wondering what your tits looked like naked."

Jodie threw her head back laughing.

He rolled onto his side, perched on one elbow. "But why do you care so much? With that thing you drive."

"What, like you don't care so much about your stupid car?"

"My stupid Mercedes costs four times as much as your Taurus."

"That's very compelling," she said. "My heart is breaking for you." She held her hand over her heart. "But if you'd have kept even half of your spine when Kate left you, it wouldn't be all you had."

The grin on his face fell, slowly, like it was melting. "You're serious?" He sat up, cross-legged, not hiding a thing. He wasn't shy, and had no reason to be. It made her blush. He just looked at her, desperate, reminding her of the wreck of a man he really was. It was almost enough to make her feel bad for him.

"Oh come on, really?" She propped herself up on her elbows. "You didn't *do* anything. *We* didn't do anything."

"That wasn't the point."

It was Jodie that Kate caught Berges flirting with, that day, that final straw before the separation. Jodie refused to take any responsibility for that, for their flirting, if that was what did him in. Jodie wasn't the only woman his wife caught him flirting with. Not by far. But that didn't count, and they never did anything. It wasn't an affair, and Jodie knew what real affairs looked like. Kate should have met Jodie's parents and all the broken relationships that followed, the mess that they made, the sneaking around and suspicions, the lies, the accusations, the throwing bottles and domestic dispute visits from the cops. Those were affairs – those were fights. She and Berges with their silly angsty play-flirting in the hallways, that was a joke. "She needs to lighten the hell up if

she thought that was an affair. It was a joke. She's a joke! And you're still taking it from her. She gave you custody of that damn car and not your daughter."

His face flushed clean of emotion, his mouth hung agape. It was true – and he knew it, didn't he? Ten seconds he stared at her like that. Then he moved across the bed. He got up, shaking his head, his voice resolved and emotionless. "You know, you're a real fucking bitch sometimes, Jodie."

"Oh come on," she said. He didn't turn, he just dressed himself quickly, not even bothering to button his shirt. "Where are you going?"

"My room." He had his shoes in his hands.

She sat up on the bed, naked still, pulling a sheet up to cover her chest. "Not like I was going to let you sleep in here."

His movement in the room stirred the chilly air, leaving her skin to rise in goosebumps, but her blood pumped with fury and adrenaline. He wouldn't respond to her. They'd been drunk – that's all it was. They'd said things they shouldn't have said, and did things they shouldn't have done. As he went for the door, she searched for something inside her, some venom to spew before he reached it. Something harder, something cutting. But there was nothing sharp enough. As he opened the door, as he walked through, as it closed behind him, all she found was disappointment.

1.4: light at the top of the stairs

A MELIA WAS THE FIRST PERSON DREW HAD EVER MET who had truly sad eyes. Sure, people were sad sometimes, but on the day he met her, she wore defeat with her whole body.

Drew had been coming in from his car, and he stopped across the street pretending to sort through his mail as he watched her through sunglasses. Her front door was propped open and she struggled with a long cardboard box in front of her house. First she lifted the front end up one stair, then up the next. She strained under its weight but she was determined. When the box rested on the slope of the stairs, she heaved up from the bottom of it, bringing it to rest level on the stoop. But as soon as she tried to pick up the front end again to raise it into the door, the back end toppled over and pulled the weight of the box back down the stairs. She was right where she started again.

She left it. She grumbled words into the air that he was too far away to hear. People walked down the street, and any one of them could have helped, had she asked. But she didn't ask. She put the box down for a moment, held her fingers to her chin, serious about her strategy, defeated and yet stubbornly hopeful. How long had she already been trying?

He left his mail in the mailbox. Between breaks in the traffic, he ran across the street.

"Can I help you?" He reached for the box in her hands, but she wouldn't let go of it.

"No, I'm fine," she said. "I don't need any help. I can get it." She only half-glanced at him, keeping her eyes to the ground. She crouched beside the box, not trying to move it anymore, her fingers clamped under the edges and her palms worn red.

"I'm sure you can," he said. "That's not what I meant."

Finally she looked up, considering him. Her eyes were the same honey brown as the freckles on her cheeks and nose, and up close, he could see how tired they were, how they held too much worry for as young as she was. She wore her hair pulled back into a ponytail, which had started to unravel, and her forehead glistened with sweat from her efforts. Her deep V-neck t-shirt hung loose as she bent over. The freckles on her chest faded into smooth peachy skin in the supple depths of cleavage where sun didn't reach.

She'd caught him staring. But instead of being angry or even rolling her eyes, she just sighed, a soft whimper. She was lean but strong, so he knew it wasn't her body giving up the fight with that box; it was all that worry and disappointment in her eyes, surrendering to the box, to being ogled by a stranger, to life.

"I would be able to," she said, biting her bottom lip, finally stepping away from the box. "But it's just too long, I think. I can't get the weight distributed right."

"I know," he said. "It's okay. Here, let me get the bottom."

He hoisted the back end up to his shoulder while she lifted the front up off the ground, and together they walked the box into her kitchen. There were other boxes in her kitchen half-unpacked, and dishes in neat piles, stacked on the counters, ordered by function, by size, by necessity. She had more stuff than he could ever conceive of using: pots and pans, cheese graters, cookbooks, every kind of spatula, slotted spoon, or grilling tongs anyone could ever need. She had a blender, a toaster, a food processor, a coffee

machine and cappuccino maker, a toaster oven. On the kitchen table, she had a stack of picture frames without any pictures in them. She seemed far too young to have so much stuff. He couldn't even recall what he had in his own kitchen to cook with – a cookie sheet for pizza rolls, or maybe a wooden spoon to stir his scrambled eggs.

She had cans of paint on the floor and some rollers. He asked her, “Do you need help with that?”

Her lips turned up in an uneasy smile. “I don't even know you,” she said. “You don't need to help paint my kitchen too.”

It was the first time she'd even cracked a smile in the five minutes he'd known her. It lit up her eyes a bit and sent a pink flush through her freckled cheeks. She swiped a hand over her brow. “But thank you,” she said. “I think my mom will help me.”

Drew introduced himself. And she told him her name: Amelia.

“I don't want to date anyone,” she blurted out then. “Not for a really long time, maybe not ever again. I'm bad at it. I think I break them. Relationships, I mean.”

“I wasn't,” he started. But yes, that had been exactly what he was thinking, he just hadn't said it out loud yet. “Yeah, I mean, okay.”

Her reluctant smile turned into a full-on grin. He didn't care what he meant or didn't mean, or what she thought he meant, he was just glad to see it.

“In case you ever need anything,” he said, pointing out toward the front door. “I'm just over there. The one on the corner.”

“Thank you, Drew,” she said. “You know, wait here, just a minute.”

On the counter, between stacked plates and a box of coffee mugs, she grabbed a wicker basket. She took tomatoes from the windowsill and placed them inside, covering them in a linen cloth. She held it out to him. “Tomatoes,” she said. “I grew them in my

old garden." A quick sadness washed over her face then; whatever happened to this old garden of hers must have been unfortunate. But she went on. "They have Lycopene. It prevents cancer."

He was speechless. What do you say to that? It might have been the very first time anyone had cared whether he got cancer or not, and he'd only known her for a few minutes. "Thank you," he said. "I don't know what to do with them."

Her laughter was a soft sound, not mocking but like something was trying to rise up from the depths of her, striving to break the surface. He'd never met anyone so defeated, yet so stubbornly hopeful. "That's okay," she said. "Try them sliced, on a good, coarse bread. With just a drizzle of olive oil, a sprinkle of salt, and a little fresh mozzarella."

"Thanks," he said. "I will." But he wasn't thinking about food. His eyes were full of her freckles and soft curves; in his head were the tiny fragments of newborn poems. She had him.

THERE WERE PEOPLE WHO HAD HARDER LIVES THAN DREW HAD. There were probably a lot of them. Drew ran errands. It was his assigned place in the family, his penance for being a writer (which none of them saw as real work), and for being a lighthouse tour guide, which they hardly saw as real work either, even if it did have scheduled hours and a paycheck.

On the brink of October, they were finishing up their final tour for the season. For the last time, Drew pointed out the Belle Haven Light with its cream-colored stucco tower, two single windows on its east wall spilling light into the stairwell, its lantern room on top encased in iron and glass. It was built in 1839, still active but now automated. The keeper's house that stood nearby was now used as a bed and breakfast. Drew told them stories about the light keepers. They were men of many jobs, providing shelter from the storms, safety and rescue, or a warm meal and bed to weary

seamen. True as it was, what really sold the tickets were the ghost stories, the unfortunate mariners struck down by a sudden storm, the small children who perished to illness or accidents, the lonely wives gone mad, the doors that opened and closed by themselves, the brass that attendants found mysteriously polished every morning, the voices whispering in empty rooms.

Drew never told the tour guests this part, but his grandfather had been Keeper Ferdinand Weston, charged with the Belle Haven Light until 1963. Both Drew's mother and his uncle had grown up on the lighthouse grounds, and Drew had asked them before about the ghost stories, were they true? His stoic uncle denied having ever saw anything, but his mother didn't. Moira would only lean in closer, with a glass of champagne in her hand and a glimmer in her eyes, "Now when I was a little girl," she would start, "I had this imaginary friend, a little boy. And I used to wake up in the morning to find your uncle's toy soldiers lined up on my windowsill like someone had been playing with them..."

The story was always different. Uncle Mitch denied having ever seen anything himself. He was the older of the two by eleven years and spent most of his childhood there. But when the lighthouse was automated and handed over to the Coast Guard – the great tragedy of progress, Uncle Mitch would say – Moira was only three years old. It was unlikely she really remembered much of anything. Everyone knew how much Uncle Mitch loved his baby sister, as much as a grown woman in her fifties could be considered a baby sister, but he'd be the first to tell you how much of a storyteller she'd always been.

They docked the seventy-five foot tour boat near the Fort Gratiot Lighthouse, where passengers could visit the museum or the lighthouse for its guided tour. The crew lined up with the captain to wish them each a nice day. "Thank you, watch your step," they said. Drew held out his hand for the old ladies. When

they were clear, they headed back to the marina to close down for the season. There would probably be some private charter work from time to time, but once the rivers froze, they'd have the winter off.

Drew took off his crew jacket, his polo underneath advertising The Fort Gratiot Boating Company, and he flung his cap into the back seat of his Jeep along with it. He took a long gulp of water – the stories and the cool lake breeze got into his lungs and made his throat dry. He laid his cell phone on the front seat next to the mail he'd picked up on his way to work. He slept over at Amelia's place often, and the mailbox at his apartment only built up: spam, spam, spam, poetry rejection, more spam, another poetry rejection, more spam, a postcard from his mother.

Drew started in on one of the poetry submissions, all of which were sent back in his own self-addressed envelopes. The first read (at the bottom of a half-page stock rejection – she couldn't even spare the paper to send a whole page): “While your poetry was lovely to read, and sounded quite exquisite, perhaps you might spend some time defining what this is really about. What is the great tragedy of this piece? Find that great tragedy and build from it,” (yes, she'd truly underlined it), “Build around it, and let the reader feel that tragedy in the pit of their very being.”

Drew was mystified. Did he even have any great tragedies? Or did he only have the opposite of tragedy – privilege and prosperity and luck. Could he blame his rejection on the lack of great tragedy in his life? Because otherwise, he'd have to accept that he was just a terrible poet. He wasn't sure which was worse.

But then he opened a second letter, and it made the first one sound downright gentle: “Nobody wants to read your love poems but your lover.”

“Hell,” Drew grumbled, balling the letter in his hand and tossing it at the windshield, where on the other side, two seagulls

fought over a McDonalds bag in the parking lot.

He put down the rest of the letters and found that his phone was blinking – a voice mail. He checked it. It was from his uncle’s housekeeper – Yi Min was a middle-aged Chinese woman with a tiny sharp voice. “I think you should know, he think he fire me, but I quit first. He is horrible old man. You find someone else.” She hung up quickly.

Drew let his head fall heavy against the seat. That had been number six. Uncle Mitch fired household help like it was his mission in life. Drew already knew he'd insist he was capable on his own, but the truth was, he couldn't do his own grocery shopping anymore, or clean his bathrooms, and he'd even started forgetting which bills he'd paid or hadn't.

Drew stuffed the spam aside and picked up the postcard from his mother. She was in Tokyo at the moment, where she'd followed her husband on business. They'd been there for a few months, but she sent a postcard whenever she found one that inspired her, no matter how many she'd sent already. This one was a landscape, with a five-story wooden pagoda rising out of a foggy valley, and on the back she wrote:

Thinking of you, darling. The fog makes everything feel just perfectly mysterious, don't you think? Reminds me of the lakeshore in the spring. Richard sends his love.

XOXO – Mom

He needed to find out why his uncle fired his housekeeper, and he wasn't in the mood for any more poetry rejections. He put his mother's postcard next to his phone in the center console, then he tucked the rest of the mail under his jacket in the back seat so the wind wouldn't blow it around. He started to drive.

It was a thirty-minute drive down I-94 to where his uncle lived in Grosse Pointe Shores. Drew drove with the music loud, butchering the lyrics to every song that came on the radio, whether he liked it or not. He wasn't a poet today. He wasn't sure what he was. What does one do with all that useless knowledge? The twenty-two kinds of knots he knew how to tie, the four languages he could speak and write semi-fluently (including English, he feared sometimes), or all those dates: the first lighthouse built on Lake Erie, the invention of the Fresnel lens, the first solar-powered light? Today, Drew was just an errand boy for his uncle.

So he turned up the radio. First he wallowed along to some Radiohead, then he shouted out some U2, and by the time he reached Grosse Pointe Shores, Weezer's "Island in the Sun" came on, and he was bouncing behind his tinted windows, drumming his steering wheel, and singing along, even the parts that went "*hip, hip*".

The neighborhood was quiet and tree-lined, just a couple blocks from the lake. His uncle was rich and cheap. In front of his colonial estate, a large lawn begged for a trim, but Uncle Mitch had a reputation for refusing to pay these local boys enough to keep it. When he was still able, he used to mow it himself into crooked crosshatches. All his life he'd been of the type to never pay for something he could do himself, but in his early seventies finally, he couldn't do much of anything himself anymore. Uncle Mitch didn't like to talk about his money. He was a retired lawyer who scarcely spent his lifetime wealth, except on weddings for his two daughters and three college educations. The rest of it he saved for the dire day he would finally need it, while complaining of his aches and pains, or how soon he hoped to die, how much cancer treatments cost (everyone got it – it was only a matter of time), or burials.

Drew stopped at the mailbox and grabbed his uncle's mail before parking near the side entrance. He let himself in at the keypad, which opened into a spacious kitchen. The house was silent except for a running dishwasher. Beyond the kitchen, the hallways of the old home were dark and narrow. The house sat under a thick copse of tall oak trees, blocking almost any natural light except thin beams in the early mornings or late evenings. Instead of illuminating the hallways, the small windows only reflected their shapes off the polished hardwood like it was glass. These were the hallways Drew used to run through as a child, pretending ghosts were chasing him until he got his cousins running after him too – Anna and Leslie would never dare run in that house until Drew started them up. The three of them took off down the darkened, bare hallways, the echo of their voices bellowing against the narrow walls. Until they were shouted at by one of the adults, stern Uncle Mitch or angry Aunt Irene. But Drew's mother never minded – she would only coo back, “Let the children be children. Don't they bring life into this tired old house?”

It was only Uncle Mitch living here now and the big house had never felt emptier. Drew found him in the den, sitting in a stiff armchair with a newspaper in his hands. The room smelled like a library. The books his uncle kept were old – biographies of World War II heroes and battles, picture books about bombers, battleships, and submarines. They mostly just collected dust these days. There were wooden model ships mounted on the walls.

Drew cleared his throat as he stepped into the library. “I'm here.”

“I know,” his uncle said. “With how you tear up that driveway.”

Drew had hardly torn up anything, but he didn't argue. And he didn't move to sit down either. In a moment, when the newspaper

page had been finished, folded and placed on the coffee table, his uncle would stand up. Uncle Mitch still had most of his hair, salt and pepper gray, and eyebrows long enough that they curled. He wore navy cable-knit sweaters and loafers without socks.

"You have some mail," Drew said. "Looks like the electric bill is in there. And did you eat today?"

"I had something."

Drew went to the refrigerator. Luckily Yi Min must have stocked it just before she'd had enough of his bullshit. And luckily she'd waited until boating season was finished too. Bless her heart.

Uncle Mitch hobbled into the kitchen after him. "But if you don't mind helping an old man out," he said. "There's that damn light again, the one upstairs."

"Again? Didn't we just replace that one? There might be something wrong with the wiring."

"It's because they've got the chinks making all our shit now."

Drew cringed. Poor Yi Min, she'd been such a sweet lady. Drew wondered what his uncle had said to her. He would have to send her two weeks wages and some flowers.

The light at the top of the stairs had always been a hassle to get to because of the second story stairwell's vaulted ceiling. Even though Uncle Mitch couldn't even reach the second story of the house, he always insisted that the rooms be kept dusted, the linens fresh, and the light bulbs in order in case anyone ever needed to come home. Now those duties were left to Drew, and whatever household help stuck around for more than a few weeks.

"Why did you fire your housekeeper?"

"She's stealing from me," Mitch said, "I just know she is. I don't like that girl."

They didn't have to be actually stealing from him – and never had, as far as Drew knew – but his uncle would think it anyway.

"You can't fire them. How am I going to keep finding new ones? They're going to start warning each other about you. And you're not going to clean the toilets yourself."

"There are six toilets in this house, and I'm only one man. I'm not paying that girl to clean toilets that nobody shits in."

Drew raised his eyebrows at his uncle. "Now don't try to tell me you don't shit in them," he said. "We both know you're full of shit."

Uncle Mitch slapped Drew in the middle of the back and laughed heartily.

Drew went to grab the ten-foot step ladder from the garage. He carried it upstairs to the second floor, propping it up against the banister for extra stability. He opened doors in the hallway – the sun was setting by then, and cast a fiery glow into the dark, cavernous space, giving him just enough light to work with. He climbed up the ladder while his uncle stood at the bottom of the staircase, watching, leaning on his cane and fretting. "Now be careful, son," Mitch chided. "You don't want to find out how much a hospital ride for a broken head costs without health insurance."

"I'm careful, I'm not going to have an accident."

"Don't be a fool," Mitch said. "Of course you are."

Drew turned his head to glare at his uncle so fast he felt the need to grasp onto the ladder's top. "What?"

"What I mean is, everyone makes mistakes. Even if you didn't make a mistake, it wouldn't have to be your fault, and it might not even be in your control. Before you know it you're lying at the bottom of a ladder or have your head through a windshield and blood pissing down your face."

Drew laughed lightly. "Heh, well, health insurance isn't going to help me any if I'm dead."

"It's not a joke, son. There will be mistakes. No one can be that perfect."

"Alright," Drew mumbled. "Alright." He positioned the light fixture over the new bulb with one hand while screwing it in with the other. He had the old bulb stashed in the pocket of his sweatshirt.

"They like you over there," Mitch said. "I bet they'd make you a marina manager if you wanted. Then you could sign up for their health insurance plan."

Even Amelia had told him, placing both hands on each of his cheeks: *Drew, honey, you really should have health insurance.* She even calculated the costs of his dental appointments for him – having been cut off his parents' policy at twenty-four, two cleanings a year out of pocket, \$125 a pop, and considering he was likely to live at least another forty years, was that really what he wanted to spend his money on?

Drew enjoyed his job doing the lighthouse tour, and he was good at budgeting his money to last the winter slow season. He knew his uncle didn't understand it. Uncle Mitch had been a lawyer for thirty-five years – a real job. Drew couldn't tell his uncle that he loved the sunshine in the summertime, or being able to work on his poetry through the winter, especially since his poetry had brought him back nothing but rejections. Perhaps he should give it up and become a journalist after all, one of those writers who published emotion-heavy news stories with a lovely poetic flair. *That was a well-written piece*, people would say. *So poignant and so astute.* Purple prose, they would mean, but they wouldn't know one way or the other. It would be writing. But with a by-line. And a paycheck. And maybe even a health insurance plan too.

Drew climbed safely down from the ladder. He flipped the switch and the dark hallway was lit, illuminating the dust on the mahogany banister and the tarnish on the silver mirrors. Drew turned the light off again and carried the ladder down the stairs.

Drew walked slowly beside his uncle as he hobbled back into

the den. "Or couldn't you teach with that fancy degree you got? What do they call that thing?"

"Master of Fine Arts," Drew said. "I might teach some day. I haven't ruled it out." Drew had no desire, in the least, to be a teacher. But his uncle had paid for his degree, and Drew wondered how long it would be before he began to regret that expense. "I don't need help getting a job. I have one. I enjoy it."

"You have half a job," Mitch said, crowing to himself. Drew was mostly convinced the old man was just giving him a hard time. Anna and Leslie hadn't used their degrees either, marrying instead, becoming a stay-at-home mom and an office secretary instead of a doctor and a business executive like they'd meant to.

"Your girl could help you, what's her name again? The stuffy redhead with the tits?"

Drew's eyes went wide. "Amelia," he said.

"That's the one," Mitch said. "She's the kind of girl who'd know about insurance. Got her head on straight."

It was almost the first nice thing his uncle had said about her.

Drew returned the ladder to the garage. When he joined his uncle again in the den, Mitch asked, "Close those windows for me, will you, son?"

It was nearing evening then, and a chill had filled the room. Drew closed the windows. He lit the fireplace and took the chair across from his uncle. He'd wait there long enough to make sure the fire would go out.

Uncle Mitch held out a newspaper, pointing to a headline. "And if you don't mind helping an old man out, could you tell me what this one says? It's those god-forsaken glasses – I can't see for shit. I don't know where the fool learned to write prescriptions."

Drew grinned. "You should fire him."

Uncle Mitch bellowed a deep, full-bellied laugh so contagious Drew had to laugh with him.

Then he began to read the newspaper, and his uncle sat back and listened to the story, turning his head to look out the window, the last warm rays of sunshine for the year, the trees already starting to show their fall colors. Drew read, and his uncle nodded here and there. The ladies at the club would always tell his uncle how much they loved Drew's speaking voice, how charismatic he was, how charming. It was how he landed the job he had, telling stories about the lighthouses, with *that smile* – Drew was a minor local celebrity among the senior set.

So Drew read his uncle the news for a while, until his uncle grew weary of it and said, "Hand me that clicker, will you?"

Drew handed him the remote, and Uncle Mitch turned on the History Channel. He checked to make sure Mitch was wearing his Life Alert, though Drew knew he wasn't allowed to ask that out loud. His uncle wouldn't ask him to mow the lawn, but he'd come back in the morning to do it anyway. In truth, Drew really didn't mind.

1.5: ready to run for it

AMELIA CAME HOME TO AN EMPTY HOUSE. THERE WAS NO clacking of Drew's laptop keyboard, no Coldplay in the background left on repeat, *A Rush of Blood to the Head* that he didn't want to admit he loved so much. There was a whole negative space that a person left behind when they were gone. Amelia and Drew didn't live together, except that most of the time, they did. He'd even taken up a corner of her spare room with his stacks of *The New Yorker* that were delivered faster than he could ever keep up reading, his pens left around the house, his scribble of random poetry on grocery receipts and sticky notes.

She picked up an electric bill payment stub from the kitchen table. *Paid online, 9/25*, she'd written on the front, and then his handwriting was scrawled over the back: *freedom, friction, fiction, fallacy*. She examined it, tossing the words around in her head like a puzzle. She'd asked him once what these random scribbles meant. "Oh, it's nothing," he had said. "I thought it might be something, but it was nothing."

Living together wasn't anything they ever really decided on. First more of his stuff gathered around her place, and then once she was used to him, she made space for his deodorants slotted between hers in the bathroom. She made room for his razor in her medicine cabinet, and he left his shaving hairs in her sink. One day,

she told him where her spare key was; she told him to meet her there, let himself in, let himself in whenever he liked. Now he took out the trash for her on Sunday nights. He had his dirty clothes mixed in with hers, and she washed them for him. He brought home her favorite groceries, and she was surprised that he always remembered what she liked: hummus and pita chips, couscous salad (though he had no idea what it actually was), albacore tuna rather than the chunk light. She made room in her cupboards for his Fritos.

She called his phone. "Where are you?"

"Just at my place," he said, sounding sleepy.

Come home, she thought. Then she quickly laughed it off. This wasn't his home, was it? "What are you doing?"

"Just writing a little. There's a submission deadline I want to make, and we didn't have plans. I just thought I'd use the quiet here."

"Oh, okay," she said. "Did you eat already? Are you going to eat?"

"Yeah, I'll eat," he said. "See you in a bit. Love you."

"Love you too," she said before they hung up.

She started dinner. One pound of ground beef, then she diced up breadcrumbs for a meatloaf. It was far too much dinner for even two people, but she had no idea what she'd make otherwise. Then she imagined herself cooking for their little imaginary family. He would play with their children while she cooked – how many would he want? Would they have her curls and his dark eyes? Would they get her freckles? Not likely, she guessed. Then she shook her head at herself. They were officially sleeping together but not officially living together. Part of her liked it that way, and part of her wondered who she thought she was fooling.

She squished the cold meat with her hands, folding it over and into the breadcrumbs. *Beep*. The oven was preheated. Amelia

closed the meatloaf inside, set the timer. She went to fold some laundry while watching the Evening World News Report.

So she decided – there while folding his boxer shorts – that she would make him a writing space in one of her spare bedrooms. Her house had three bedrooms: a master bedroom; a second bedroom she used for her treadmill, filing cabinets, and an ironing board; and then there was a tiny third room. He could use the smallest room if he wanted. It had one big, airy window, room enough for a big desk, and space on the walls for shelving. It would work, and besides, it was far too small a room to ever put a child in some day.

Amelia wouldn't dare tell her mother that she'd bought this house with the least concern for which rooms might or might not fit children. It would only please her too much.

Amelia went to the front door, looking down the street between parked cars and people walking to restaurants for dinner. She didn't want to call Drew again; she didn't want to be a nag. She would just wait for him instead. She slipped on a sweater and stepped out onto her front stoop, grabbing her cell phone from her purse, but not bothering to slip on any shoes. The pavement felt cold even through her socks.

She cradled the phone between both hands, watching the couples walk by on dates, hand in hand. She recognized some of her neighbors and waved. She said "hello" to some of the ones she didn't recognize too. She flipped open her phone and scrolled through her contacts list, running down the small list of people in her life, trying to decide who she could call. Piper would be with Tom tonight, and Amelia didn't want to bother them. Her mother was watching a movie she wasn't interested in. And Jodie?

Jodie hated phones – all she ever wanted to know was if they were going to hang out or not, where, and when? Amelia remembered her phone call to Drew the other night, the one she

erased. What had she wanted?

Help? Nightmares flashed through her head – Jodie in a ditch, after having drunk herself silly. Had they heard from her since the wedding? Had she ever made it home? Amelia counted back the days, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. She imagined Jodie lying in wreckage, her leg trapped between mangled metal and probably broken, one last battery bar left on her cell phone. She'd called Drew for help – maybe she'd tried to call Amelia too, but Amelia hadn't had her own phone that night. Jodie had called for help, and Amelia deleted it. "Oh no," Amelia said. She dialed.

Jodie answered. "Yeah?"

"Hey!" Amelia almost said, *You're alive!* But she stopped herself, and toned down her relief. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay," Jodie said. "I just came off an eighteen-hour labor that ended in a c-section. And I came home three minutes too late for *American Idol*. Why?"

Amelia sighed, the tight muscles in her face relaxing. "No reason," she said.

Before long, Jodie made it clear she needed to go pee, slap together a sandwich to eat for dinner, and make it back to her TV before *Dancing with the Stars* came on.

Amelia wondered if Drew would be back before bedtime. She could never sleep well alone. Her mother had suggested she get a big dog, and though Amelia never really cared for dogs, she did consider it. At night, she heard every creak and groan of the house, drunken footsteps stumbling home, wind rattling the storm door. She might have taken karate, but she didn't particularly want to kick people, or get kicked. She slept with a fireplace poker under her bed, but then she had nightmares about having to stab someone with it. In the nights before Drew slept over often, she used to call him at odd hours of the night, trying to convince him, "I'm fine, I just can't sleep." She was not really fine, but that she

couldn't sleep was the truth. He had the most lovely speaking voice, forming his phrases like poetry, and when he was tired, his voice grew low and mellow, sonorous. He would talk to her until she fell asleep.

It was cool enough outside that the concrete steps chilled her bottom where she sat. She hugged her arms around herself. This had been the exact place she'd first met Drew. She knew he didn't believe that she was happy that day, but it had truly been one of the proudest moments of her life – becoming a homeowner. This two-story new-build townhouse, with its tiny yard and narrow hallways, its drafty windows and all the spiders in the basement. It was all hers. Buying her own home was the proudest thing Amelia had ever done for herself. That, and not marrying Eric.

She was brave not to marry Eric because he was a good man, and they cared about each other enough. It would have been plenty for a lot of women. He had asked her. It was a thoughtful proposal too, dinner at an upscale French restaurant a little more expensive than he could afford. The ring he offered her hadn't been impressive, but she wasn't surprised or offended by that. What he offered her was a long and complex list of how he thought they might work together, the facts of their compatibility, their similar life goals, all laid out in order like he was considering buying a house. He was right – about the compatibility, the similar life goals – and after living together for three years, after so much time invested, she seriously considered it.

She didn't want him back. Not at all. What she wanted was what he had – the ability to move on, to fall in love again and land so carelessly.

She heard the timer go off in the kitchen. Had it really been that long already?

She pulled the meatloaf out of the oven and called Drew. She got his voicemail. She called again and there was still no answer.

He'd fallen asleep, hadn't he? She covered their dinner in foil and put it back in the oven. She slipped on her shoes and started out across the street.

It wasn't very late, but late enough that considering it was a weeknight, the streets had gone quiet. There was an older woman walking with a bag of groceries, a man jogging with his dog, a local bar had a few smokers gathered around its front door. Amelia crossed the street to Drew's apartment building. An unsettling tension grew inside her, but she didn't think it was because she felt unsafe. This part of town had always been fine, even at night.

She searched through her key ring for the spare he'd given her. She knocked first, lightly, not wanting to disturb his neighbors at this time of night. She wasn't sure if she should have knocked or not; he didn't knock first anymore before coming into her house. She called him one more time and didn't hear his phone ringing inside the apartment. He left it on vibrate somewhere, she hoped. Or maybe he turned it off so he could focus – though she knew that wasn't true because she'd just called him a couple of hours ago.

It was almost enough to make her turn around, go home, pretend nothing was wrong. Just wait for him to come back, however long that took. She'd eat dinner by herself and save him a plate to heat up later. The last thing she wanted was to walk into yet another scene she was never meant to see – muffled whispers, bodies rushing apart, grasping for cover – she'd been through that too many times before.

She filled up her lungs, breathing out slowly through her lips. Then she shook her head. No, that's not what this was. It couldn't be. She slipped the key into the door.

Being in his apartment felt like being in a hotel room. He didn't keep much here anymore. The refrigerator buzzed and she wondered if he even had any food in it. She couldn't remember the last time they'd actually cooked something here.

She found his cell phone on the couch, blinking with her missed phone calls. Then she found him in his bedroom, napping. She exhaled, only then realizing she'd been holding her breath, and a smile took over her face. He had pages of poetry spread out over the bed and a red pen still held in his hand. She sat beside him.

His eyes fluttered open, and he reached out to touch her hand. "Hey, what time is it? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, it was just too quiet over there. I made dinner, it's finished. Are you ready to head back?" She grinned. "And you have red pen on your face."

He wiped a hand over his face, in the wrong spot, and then stretched, reaching, sweeping her into his hands with a hopeful smile on his face. "Can we take a few minutes?" He took her hips into his hands, a migratory hug that rolled her on top of him. He slid his hands under her shirt, and she leaned over him to rub the red pen mark on his cheek until it was gone. She had the oven turned off, but the heat should keep for a little while.

"Ten minutes, maybe."

"Is that all?" He grinned. "What I have in mind is going to take at least twenty-five."

His hands moved surely over her skin, skimming over the small of her back, slipping down her sides and sending warmth coursing through her body.

"Okay, twenty-five," she said, leaning down to kiss him.

THE WAY THEY HAD FIRST COME TOGETHER WAS MORE LIKE a beautiful accident than it was an actual decision. They were camping, and Piper wanted to switch tents so she could bunk with Tom. "Please, please," Piper pleaded, taking Amelia's hands into hers, while Tom stood behind her by a few yards, quiet but surely hoping to get laid. The problem was, that would leave Amelia only men to bunk with, and most of them were strangers.

Liberal and forward-thinking as Amelia might have been, that was just not going to work. But there was also Drew. "Come on, it's Drew," Piper said. "You guys are friends. He's not going to assault you or anything." She paused then, a very serious consideration, nodding her head. "He might dream about you naked though."

So Amelia bunked with Drew. The first night, they lay awake talking – or she talked, as he mumbled back sleepy responses. He was listening; he promised he was. He'd reached between their sleeping bags to hold her hand, and at some point she realized his dreamy mumbles had stopped entirely. He'd fallen asleep.

The way he slept was so peaceful, so calm, that a part of her felt jealous. It was the first time she'd seen him sleep. She placed a hand on his chest, flat, watching it rise and fall with each breath. It was chilly then, early in the fall, so she lowered herself and slipped her arm around him, rested her head on his shoulder, stole his body heat – no, not stole. It was hers for the taking, if she wanted it. He had always made that much clear. He didn't wake at her touch, but stirred a little, turning to nuzzle his face into her hair. The way he slept amazed her; she'd never been able to close her eyes with so little worry. Not since she was a child – and maybe not then either, with the turbulence of her family's nomadic military life, all that unpredictability.

Drew hadn't tried anything more scandalous than spooning her that night, which she knew he wouldn't. She let him hold her for a while before they both rolled over in their sleep and lost each other.

The second night, there were a dozen of them sitting around the campfire. Some of them Amelia knew better than others: one of Piper's sisters and her husband, a couple of Drew's friends and some random girls they'd picked up at another campsite. Jodie hadn't come – she hated the outdoors.

They'd run out of chairs. Amelia hovered near the fire, holding a plastic cup in her hand, filled with a cheap boxed red wine blend. She didn't see Drew's hands before she felt them on her hips, reaching out and pulling her back to him, mindful not to pull so fast she spilled her wine. "Come keep me warm," he said.

Before she could worry about falling backwards off his lap to collide with the ground, he had one arm behind her back, one arm around her waist, a warm cradle for her to settle into. She'd never sat in his lap before, and it was a sensation she wasn't prepared for. Not because they were too close, because they'd been this close before, leaning in to whisper secrets in each other's ears about their friends, or stealing a sip of his beer to see if she would like it (and she never did). It wasn't because he leaned his lips to her shoulder, as if to kiss her through the polar fleece – there had been countless little play kisses on the cheek or the hand, snuck in between laughs or tickles. It wasn't because of the way he touched her, because she'd felt his hands before, the way he would stealthily feel her up in the disguise of a well-meaning hug, as if she didn't know what he was doing. It was because she had to turn her face away from his lips, so close to hers that she felt an unbearable pull to lean right over and kiss him. If she looked into his eyes, she knew she wouldn't last the night.

At some point people had gone elsewhere, to bed, or to flirt in front of other fires. There were extra chairs now, but she was still sitting in his lap, leaving all those empty chairs unused. She wondered if she should get up to sit somewhere else, but she didn't move. And that was when he looked at her, and she was caught there as he took her hand into his and said, "Your fingers are cold." Her heart swelled so much she could hardly remember how to breathe. She must have looked stunned. Or sickly. He asked her, "You okay?"

Was she okay? She didn't know.

Because there, in the quiet of the woods, sitting in his lap, she knew that she'd finally fallen in love with him. She wasn't sure when or how it happened. It wasn't something she ever decided. She hadn't ever set aside all those precautions, or given those feelings permission to grow, and yet there they were.

So she kissed him. Not on the cheek like she usually did, not playful, not a joke. When her lips left his, he pulled back to look her in the eyes, half speechless and half startled. How long had he been waiting for an actual kiss from her? This was a big deal, wasn't it? *See*, she wanted to tell him, *I told you so*.

But when the shock wore off, he put his fingers in her hair and kissed her back. They kissed with his hand on her cheek and her arms wrapped around his shoulders. They kissed some more, and she worried that his legs might go numb from her weight – if they had, he didn't say so. They sat kissing long into the evening, the firelight fading and growing cold, occasionally pulling back to whisper to each other, or even just to breathe. They kissed for so long that neither of them noticed the rain starting, a fine mist that settled on their hair and clothes, until the sky broke open with a heavy downpour.

Amelia jumped up from Drew's lap. "It's raining," she told him, though it really wasn't something he could have missed. They should have taken cover in the tent – in the dry and dark privacy of his tent – but somehow her feet wouldn't carry her there. It would have meant too much. She started picking up the campsite instead, paper plates and plastic cups, beer bottles tossed beside a trash bag and not into it. She put away all the things their friends had left lying around. She moved quickly, the rain gathering on her head and starting to run into her eyes, and it didn't help that the fire had sputtered out and left them with no light.

Drew stopped her at the cooler. "It's okay, leave it."

"But the animals," she told him. "Don't you know a bear can open a cooler if it wanted to?"

He looked at her, though he was in shadow and she couldn't make out his expression to know what he was thinking. He took a key ring from his pocket, beeping open the trunk of his Jeep. He picked up the cooler. "Open the hatch for me?"

They stowed the cooler in the back and stood under the open hatch as rain fell around them. There was little room under the hatch. They were both already wet, but she nuzzled against his side to keep warm. Their friends scurried back into their tents, some with a wave, or a shout, or dragging back a girl they hadn't known at the start of the night. Casual sex – Amelia had tried it before. Strange as it had been for her, casual sex had been easy and uncomplicated. That wasn't what was happening here. What was happening here, the next logical step, the only direction they had left to go, would have been the least casual thing she ever did. *Break my heart if you want*, he used to tell her, *it'll just make for good poetry*. She'd been there too many times before – it wasn't worth good poetry. But hadn't she been all wrong about it? It was hearts, not bodies, that broke when these things went wrong. And weren't their hearts already in it? Whatever came next was completely out of her control.

The rain only grew heavier – they had nowhere else to go. He nudged her. "Ready to run for it?"

She nodded. She was ready.

He closed the hatch, wrapped his arm around her shoulders and they ran, unzipping the tent and trying not to bring too much mud inside with their shoes.

She zipped the tent flap behind her, letting her eyes adjust in the dark. A nearby trail light cast a yellowish glow on the tent. Drew sat on his sleeping bag, wet in his clothes, taking his phone and keys from his pockets. "Wait," she said, reaching for his hands, her cheeks

flushing warm with the intentions she had in mind. “You’ll get the sleeping bags wet.” She pulled him up to kneeling, slipping her hands underneath his shirt to pull it up, to pull it over his head.

They kissed as they undressed each other, laying wet clothing at the foot of their sleeping bags to dry, carefully at first, then losing themselves to the frenzy, flinging the clothing across the tent – a sock, a pair of jeans, her bra. She pulled his body closer to hers. He lowered his face to kiss her shoulder, his hands pressed to her damp skin, warming her then leaving behind goosebumps and a trail of static. He laid her back across the sleeping bag and moved himself over her, taking slow pleasure in every touch, every kiss. He reveled in her. He touched her like it was his reward.

Her skin became electrified as he traced from her collarbone, down, slowly, finally taking her breast into his hand, her nipple to his tongue. Hands and bodies were tangled, lips and tongues, fingers and hair, and one of his hands finally slid down. She inhaled, a soft gasp. He paused there, where she throbbed at the feel of his fingertips, only separated by the thin cotton of her panties, wet from the rain, transferring all that heat from his skin. He hesitated, as if asking permission. He didn’t have to ask, but she answered him anyway, nodding, yes. He slipped her panties down, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him inside her.

The rain went on steadily that night, a cadence of splattering drops and thrumming gusts of wind. No one could hear their heavy breathing, or the telling crinkle of the sleeping bags they rolled on, moving together, wet kisses and stifled moans. The rain covered them and kept their secret.

And in the morning, when they’d dressed and come out of the tent to join the others for breakfast, with tired eyes and tousled hair, when he kissed her cheek in front of them all, no

one thought the least thing about it. It was just Drew kissing Amelia, doting on her the way he always had, that tired old game. It had been so big, so transforming, and yet no one noticed the difference, as if at some point, it had already happened when she wasn't paying attention. As if it had been there all along, and she'd only just seen it with her own eyes.

HIS BEDROOM CLOSET WAS OPEN AND MOSTLY BARE, HOLDING five empty clothes hangers and a sweater she'd never seen him wear. The sheets smelled stale, and the clock on his nightstand was six months overdue for its Daylight Savings Time update. They lay naked, their bodies still flushed and buzzing, one of the sheets twisted and pulled haphazardly across their legs. They'd taken a little longer than twenty-five minutes. "You should move in with me," she said. "We're never here anymore."

He smiled. "I guess you're right."

"Your bed is better than mine, but I want to keep my couch. You can bring your lamps, but you're not touching my kitchen. Not a single thing."

"What would I know about kitchens anyway?"

"You really want to live with me?"

"You know I do. I'd love to."

"This is going to make my mother happy."

"Well, while we're at it," he said, grinning at her. "I know what would make your mom even happier."

"I can't marry you," she said.

"Oh, I wasn't talking about that," he teased. "I meant I could knock you up."

"Ha," she laughed. He was right.

"But why can't you marry me?"

It gave her pause. Why? "Because my dad isn't here," she said. "Who'd give me away?"

“Ah, right. Good reason.” He lay on her chest, his face full of her breasts and smiling. He traced a finger along the curve of one, then let his hand spread over it. “We could just have a really long engagement. And get married some time after he gets back.”

That. When she heard it, she stopped breathing a little. It was terrifying in a perfect way, because she knew that was exactly what she wanted. She hadn't even considered it an option. She'd had proposals before, the lines and propositions and promises, but the most honest thing she'd ever heard was her drunk boyfriend saying he wanted to marry her on her bathroom floor. He wasn't just her lover; he was her best and most trusted friend, and there was no turning back from that. She had already fallen much deeper than she ever intended. “Okay,” she said.

He lifted his head. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she repeated. “Really long. And we can't tell my mom, because you know she'd start planning.”

His brow twisted, and he sighed, full of both joy and disappointment. “I would have taken you somewhere. I don't even have a ring yet. I would have made it really nice.”

No, she thought, this was nice. It was just what she needed. “It was perfect,” she said.

He finally let the shock and surprise fade from his face, and he kissed her. He wasn't scared and she knew he wouldn't be. She willed herself to believe he was right. As she kissed him back, she thought the fear might have dissipated, but it didn't. Not completely. In the undercurrents of her mind, she found herself pleading with the universe or whatever god might be listening, that this love would never become stale or grow into something vague and metaphysical, that it wouldn't become yet another heartbreak to make for good poetry. This was more than hoping. This was a prayer, *Lord, please, let this time be enough.*

Thank you for reading!

I hope you've enjoyed this sample of *Exactly Where They'd Fall*. I'd love it if you checked out the full version in either e-book or paperback: [look here](#).

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Laura Rae Amos is a Michigan native now living near Washington DC with her charming husband and tornado of a little boy. After studying creative writing at the University of Toledo, she moved to the suburbs of Detroit to have a baby instead of an MFA. She is a blogger, web-fiction writer, poet, occasional musician, photographer, dabbling artisan, and all around creative distraction. She has nineteen books in her head and needs to learn to write faster. Or else focus. *Exactly Where They'd Fall* is her debut novel.

Please visit [lauraraeamos.com](#) or follow [@LauraRaeAmos](#) on Twitter to find out more about upcoming projects, to read more about the making of *Exactly Where They'd Fall*, or to learn about the other books in this "story web". Though this isn't a traditional series, you can be assured that you'll see many of these characters again in one form or another.

Thank you for letting me share this story with you!

Laura Rae Amos